

40. A short trip to Central Asia

By

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At the time of the SVEN HEDIN expeditions a caravan journey over the tableland of Changtang was fraught with difficulties. The obstacles are manifold. The low temperature—there being no summer at an average height of 5000 ms. The thin air—the barometric pressure is about half of what most of us experience at home. Hard winds blow unimpeded over landscape, where relatively low east-westerly mountain-ridges cannot brake the onrushing masses of air. There is no forest to give the traveller a sorely needed shelter. The pasturage is extremely scant. Only by using concentrates—corn and barley—for the animals is it possible to arrange a transport over long distances. Topographic obstacles of many kinds strain the animals to the utmost. Lack, not only of pasture, but sometimes even of water, makes times very hard indeed. In spite of this caravan-people have learnt to overcome the difficulties. The different conditions of dearth are met with the experience accumulated by generations. To-day we have neither water nor firewood. Then Abdu Rahim, the caravanbashi (“bash” = head), pours a small heap of corn on a “kighiz”, a felted woollen rug. The donkeys, scenting the grain, turn up in a circle around the pile of maize, head by head, with sniffing muzzles. Having no water to drink they will not eat the corn, but the smell of food makes them calm and so they stay quiet throughout the night. They look like huge ox-eye daisies with greyish petals around the yellow centre of the flower. By forming a compact group they also keep warm. Not even a rapacious wolf dares attack such a crowd. The hooves of the donkey are its best means of defence and he who once has experienced its precision of aim takes care to avoid such unpleasant caresses.

The herbs are so short that it is difficult for our animals to snap up enough to appease their hunger. The wild yak, the proud game of the high plains, has by nature been endowed with barbs on the underside of the tongue. With their help it strips off the vegetation, and gets its fill of forage. The caravan men meet the lack of water in their own practical way. There is perhaps snow? Then mix it with “talkan”, flour roasted in fat, and you will have a nourishing and tasty—though a bit cold—porridge without any cooking. And if there is no snow, there may be ice which can be crushed. If the hunting has been good recently, there are large bags with dried meat. It is cut in long strips, meant to be gnawed.

In the evening, when the day's journey has come to an end, and the meat has been eaten, a candle is lit on top of one of the wooden boxes. By this scanty

light he who during the day has drawn his map fills in details from the annotations, and uses the still vivid pictures of the day to add the variability of the ground formations. One sleeps well. Perhaps a long-haired dog lies close to one's feet, and shares its warmth with its master. In another tent two goats serve the same purpose, but at the same time supply a much stronger aroma.

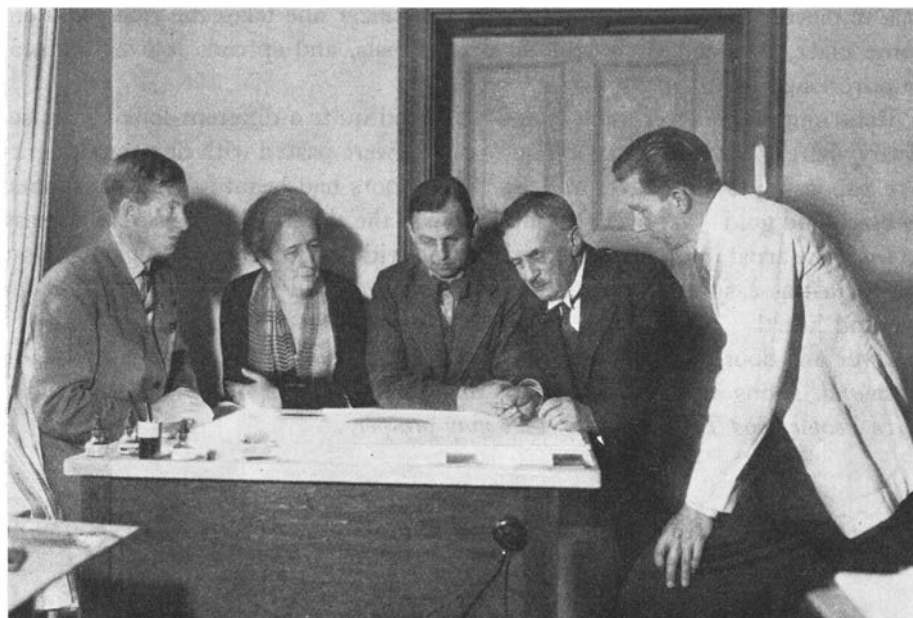
In Spring 1932 ERIK NORIN and I travelled together in these regions, but were forced by the difficulties encountered to split our caravan into two, and to separate at Lake Aqsaichin. He went along our planned route, eastward bound, with some thirty donkeys. I turned back towards Jarkand, with the assistance of good friends renewed my caravan, and started fresh in easterly direction. To both of us the journey turned out to be rather rough. When NORIN with his servants again reached inhabited districts in the mountains south of Keriya, it was with only one of his animals left. All the men carried heavy loads. NORIN himself had one very remarkable burden, a precious pillow. It was stuffed with route maps and plane-table sheets, collected during many days of diligent fieldwork. Good conscience is the best pillow—but alas—how hard! My caravan, too, had to endure hardships. But we both succeeded in bringing back all the human beings to their own country and to safety.

So we thought at that time. But soon waves of revolutions were to surge over Eastern Turkistan and security was hard to find. We both were lucky, and came safe and sound from the adventures, he before the riot reached its peak, and I during a relatively calm intervening period.

So I came, as it happened, to spend the turn of the year 1932–33 in the small but important town of Charchan. It is often shown on maps of the world, and one might imagine it to be a town of millions, but, as a matter of fact, it has only some 500 inhabitants.

On New Year's Eve two Chinese friends of mine came for a visit to my caravanserai. They had with them a servant who pushed a high-wheeled cart. It was covered by a tarpaulin. One of the men was Tsa Kodjang, slightly aged and a jovial secretary with playing eyes who also enjoyed to let the dice roll, and who had a fine sense for the sonorous ringing of well-filled wine cups. The other one, Huang Ssueh, the elegant and artistical clerk who manipulated his brushes with such delicate touch both to the delight of himself and of others. Visiting him one often found him rubbing the glass-hard rod of Indian ink with steady but swiftly rotating movements against the slate in the inkbox. With gliding strokes of the strong brush and the light pressure of the forefingertop, he then collected the thick, pasty ink in a porcelain cup, covered with an inverted saucer. That was the colour supply to be used, when inspiration came.

They were two good friends, acting up to each other. Tsa stood as a rule for the recollection of quotations from the Ancients and the creation of elegant aphorisms and amusing oddities. Huang painted with bold strokes what the friend dictated. And then there was a mutual but friendly and clever criticism. Both were learned men, and complemented each other in a charming and



The elaboration of the sketch-maps from the HEDIN expedition is discussed by (from right to left): ERIK NORIN, SVEN HEDIN, DAVID HUMMEL, MISS ALMA HEDIN, and the present writer.

perfectly successful way. They greeted with hands, palm to palm, raised to the brows in a sign of reverence, and I returned the gesture.

“To-day we do not come to enjoy your flavourful tea, nor to have talks of beautiful things, but with a prayer.” What might it be that these my good friends so kindly could ask of me? Well, my New Year was approaching—theirs was to follow a fortnight later on—and now they asked if my house could be at their disposal for a few hours? A year ago I had made a similar proposal to an old friend of mine, a carpet-maker in Khotan, and that had turned out rather well. So I accepted wholeheartedly.

My faithful Mongol servant Tomes took good care of my house. Anyhow a little tidying up could not hurt. He and I left for a walk towards the eastern border of the oasis. Times were a bit uneasy, and often in the evenings one could see weak glimpses of light, far off, flickering and vanishing. When times become dangerous and risky, people bury their most valuable treasures in a safe place. The dry sand does not damage even the most delicate things. But sometimes a whim of Fate may prevent the hider from coming back to fetch his valuables. Years or perhaps centuries later they may be uncovered by a haphazard movement of the sand dunes. But now by daylight nothing living was seen upon the desert. And as usual the mountains in the south were hidden by the fine dust in the air, whirled up by the gales, seldom allowing a sight of more than a few kilometres. Rain is rare. Still the farming is flourishing, but this is

due to clever irrigation. Instead of using fertilizer one takes the rich soil from some place, where it is difficult to draw canals, and spreads it over the old, impoverished field.

Returning home after a few hours we found quite a different-looking house. Everywhere warm red colours. The windows were pasted with new parchment-like paper. Wide strips over and along the doors had beautiful signs inscribed in black and gold. Just over the entrance was the sign of good luck. It was easy to trace the artist in the elegant writing. And with the interpretation given below it was just as easy to identify the poet. That was Old China and a delight for eye and heart!

Over one door the text ran thus: *May Spring bring Happiness and Health to Mankind.* Along its left post: *Peace and Justice for our Work.* To the right: *Give People good Thoughts, that they may prosper.*



In the hall was a cubic lantern, another one in the drawing room. Their sides were pasted with the same parchment-like paper as were the windows. It is made of the tough fibres from mulberry trees. And each side had a poem inscribed in graceful characters.

One dealt with the importance of learning: *A wise man withdrew into the mountains and lived as a hermit in a small cave far from the turmoil of the world. He became more and more learned. One day the Prince heard of the pious recluse. He searched for nine days before finding the hermit's dwelling. Seven days he stayed*

with him acquiring knowledge.—A thousand years onward in time the Prince helped his people.

Another essay dealt in a poetic way with natural science: *Even the dry desert hills have their beauty. Sometimes soft rain falls there. The water gathers in the valleys to form streams so dazzlingly clear that you can see the little stones shifting on the bottom. Then you remember the moon which silvers the fir-tree needles and the trembling poplar leaves.—The stones too have their charm.*

That may stand as a concluding vignette for these short lines written down in commemoration of happy days in distant lands shared with the comrade ERIK NORIN once described by me thus: "A tall fellow, pipe in mouth with weather-beaten face, a small pointed beard, steel-grey eyes, every inch a geologist; the experienced and reliable colleague, the warm friend."