

When we had been travelling for an hour and a quarter the reeds on either side began to grow thinner and lower; and at last they almost came to an end, and the view was no longer obscured. Several farms and some isolated trees and orchards came into sight. Everything had been devastated. The roofs were burned, and had fallen in. The trees nearest the houses were black and charred — only the trunks were left, like the crosses in churchyards.

Half an hour farther on, to the left of the road, we noticed something quite near the ruins of a farm that brought the whole column to a halt. Eleven camels and a few horses were grazing there, watched by two men. One of the pair, who on closer inspection proved to be a Chinese boy of twelve, was persuaded to come up to my car. In a trembling voice he told us that his family was one of the last six that had remained in this village, Huang-lu-kang, and that he was watching over its animals.

BORDER GUARDS

We resumed our journey, driving, perforce, on the same deeply rutted cart-track. In one place the chassis of the small car stuck fast on the ground between the ruts. By the time we were clear again the three lorries, which were ahead, had stopped. Soldiers were running to and fro, while others were coming from a farm behind a tent to the left of the road. We hurried on and drove up to the head of the column.

A dozen soldiers, clad in sheepskin coats and with rifles in their hands, had surrounded a few of our men and were closely examining their passports. When TSERAT's lorry was yet about a hundred meters from the tent the soldiers had rushed out and lain down under cover. With their rifles pointed at the drivers they had threatened to open fire if the cars came on. TSERAT had promptly stopped dead, while YEW jumped out with his hands up to show that he carried no fire-arms. The soldiers had thereupon lowered their rifles, and some of them got up and waited for YEW to approach. On hearing who we were they were reassured. They were Tungans and Turkis belonging to General MA CHUNG-YING's army. The post was under the command of a most arrogant young puppy, who stamped our passports and announced domineeringly that we must wait here till the commandant at Hami had been informed of our presence by telephone.

As a result of the telephone conversation all our fire-arms were taken from us and put in one place. Two soldiers were to be responsible for our little arsenal on the way in to Hami, whither we might proceed at once. The Turki who was carrying out these orders told us that the village inhabitants had fled to Anhsi, Tun-huang and the mountains to the north, but that many people still remained in Hami.

Here, at Huang-lu-kang, we stopped our road-mapping in order not to arouse any unnecessary suspicions. From now on we were to follow the main roads of the Sinkiang province, mapped long since.