

We had not got far before ten more soldiers rushed out at us from a ruined farm on the left. They raised their rifles and seemed to be on the point of receiving us with a hail of bullets. But our escorting officer lifted his hand and shouted an order that checked them.

Now we were driving along the main street of the town itself. The shops in the bazaar were all shut with massive wooden shutters. All trade was dead. A few ragged boys were playing at one or two street corners.

We stopped at the gate of Commandant CHANG FENG-MING's yamen in the Chinese town. He received me in the same room as had General LIU six years before. Now the Chinese had been driven out, and the Tungan MA CHUNG-YING («Big Horse») ruled over the little that was left of Hami.

An hour later we drove to the premises of the omnibus company, where we were received by a Mr Yü, the manager. The yard was so small that the cars could only just turn round when parking. Two rooms — one rather small and one very large — were placed at our disposal. The large room was used as a warehouse for bales of cotton; and these now served as mattresses for some of our sleeping-bags. A stove was lighted in the middle of the room.

Our first day in Hami was devoted to official visits. We called on the commandant again and received the pleasant news that the telegraph lines were open. We therefore sent a message to General MA CHUNG-YING, asking for permission to continue our journey to Turfan and thence to his headquarters.

At the office of the Eurasia Aviation Co. we met Mr YANG, the head of the station, and his two assistants. All three spoke German.

The afternoon was taken up with a series of return visits according to ancient Chinese etiquette, with tea, tobacco and small talk. When we afterwards summed up the gossip we had heard in the course of the day we extracted from it the following military-political probabilities. MA CHUNG-YING was besieging Urumchi, whose fall might be expected at any moment. On the fall of this city MA would be the absolute ruler of the whole of Sinkiang. His goodwill would therefore be an advantage to our expedition, which, by the way, had been ordered to remain entirely neutral.

Meantime, MA was short of troops. He was getting hold of all the men he could — continually making fresh calls on Hami and sucking dry the already impoverished and depopulated oasis.

All communications with Urumchi were cut, and it was impossible to go there without passing through the fighting lines, where we should have been suspect to both sides and probably ended up by being shot. We could, on the other hand, drive to Turfan, Korla and Kucha — if we were not afraid of robbers. The whole length of T'ien-shan Nan-lu, or Kashgaria, was said to be in MA CHUNG-YING's power. What the situation at Kashgar, Yarkend and Khotan might be, no-one knew. In general we found news of the military position as unreliable as we had found it a few months before in Peking.