

instrument-case. A thermometer and the glasses of two chronometers were smashed.

Carts and mounted men grew more numerous — we could see that we were approaching a town of some size. Leaving the village of Sengim on our right, we descended through the valley of the same name. Here a brook flowed between white strips of ice. Lower down it ran between perpendicular walls of loessic soil, like a canyon. According to the altimeters, we were now at sea-level and crossing the boundary of the deepest dry basin in the world.

On the left side of the canyon the road grew narrower; and we had the steep drop with the stream at the bottom on our right. Horrible wheel-tracks, and an unpleasantly swaying bridge over a side-valley! The right wheel-track often went disquietingly near the sharp-cut edge, and we wondered whether the crumbling loess cliff would collapse under the three-ton weight of a motor-lorry. See Plate 23.

Ten li from Turfan we were met by three distinguished persons who stopped and welcomed us. They were our old friend from 1928, YOLBARS KHAN (See Pl. 47), General LI HAI-JO, chief-of-staff to General MA, and Mr PAI, whose acquaintance we had made in Peking, where he was General MA's representative.

IN TURFAN

Rumbling and rattling, the convoy of heavy »elephants» swayed in the wake of the small car into the main street of the bazaar, pitch-dark and resembling a railway tunnel. Here and there an oil-lamp or a Chinese paper lantern was still burning; and at a few still open stalls stood belated Turki loafers, caravan guides, tramps and homeless boys, gazing at our nocturnal procession. Sentries and policemen eyed us askance; but YOLBARS reassured them. He gave our driver directions where to go; he had already had a house prepared for us. We stopped, presently, outside the door and entered. A large room was placed at our disposal and furnished with the boxes we required for daily use. There was also a smaller room and a kitchen. A Chinese dinner was served in the big room.

During the meal YOLBARS asked: »Can I borrow two of your lorries for a few days? General MA needs them.»

»No, not on any account,» I answered decidedly.

»Well, can you lend me 50 gallons of petrol for the only car we have? We have not enough petrol.»

»Nor have we,» I replied. »We must carry out our task in the service of the Nanking Government, and need every drop ourselves.»

»I'm only asking for a loan. There are stores of petrol at Qara-shahr and Kucha, and you can there get back what you have lent me.»