

at a burning house. The rafters and everything else of wood was in flames. The house consisted of three low wings and a wall round a rectangular yard. Two of the wings were on fire. All the furniture had been thrown out into the yard — chests, tables, stools, boxes, baskets, shabby carpets and ragged clothing. The things were lying all over the place, some of them smashed. We walked along the village street. Not a soul was to be seen, nor any dead bodies. No dog barked, and no cock crew in these desolate regions, where only the flames of arson hissed and flared. Farther on a telegraph wire was stretched across the street. It was just high enough to cut a rider's throat, or at least unseat him.

What had happened at Chuqur? Incendiaries and looters had been there. The fire might have been burning for a few hours. A gang had probably come down from the mountains close by. The village had been inhabited that morning; and the people had most likely fled into the desert, or hidden among the tamarisks of the steppe. It was even not impossible that the robbers had been surprised at their task by the buzz of our motors, and concealed themselves in the houses on the outskirts of the village. Our admirable escort proposed that we should drive on as fast as we could to Qara-shahr. But I gave orders that we should encamp at the next village, Tagharchi («Sack Maker»), where we arrived at half-past seven.

Here we drove into a small yard with low walls. All the houses round about had been destroyed. A few elms grew there, among them a fine old tree around which a little temple had been built. As the neighbourhood seemed unsafe, we decided to post sentries from ten to six, an hour's duty for each man. The five Tungans who formed our guard declared that they did not mean to keep watch. If robbers attacked us, we might wake them. So saying, they slunk into a house close at hand that was only half destroyed.

We left Tagharchi the next morning under a gloomy sky, and were soon driving through a pleasant little wood of poplars — a most unusual sight. After this the road was sunk three feet deep in the clay. Then came another stretch of wood, set among fairly rich vegetation, tamarisks and tussocks of grass. The dust swirled; trees and bushes were grey and yellow; the poplars still bore their leaves, which showed that there had been no storm since the autumn before. We often passed broken chests and empty boxes that had been thrown away by fugitives.

The village of Tawilgha was completely devastated. There was an avenue of Lombardy poplars, some of them blackened by fire. The street was encumbered with heaps of sun-dried bricks from houses that had collapsed. Outside the village the road wound along like a grey band across the yellow plain. A solitary dog was hunting for something. Not far from the road clouds of black smoke were rising. Was it a burning village? No, but a steppe fire, dangerous to our petrol drums.

The vegetation ceased, and we crossed a belt of ice. Here began a tract of salt marshes called Chong-köl, or «Great Lake». All the ground was chalky white with salt, giving the appearance of new-fallen snow. Curiously enough, someone