

VI. IN THE GRIP OF THE WAR

Monday, March 5th, was a day none of us is likely to forget. I was tired, and slept late. In the morning I inspected GEORG's raft, which was lying almost completed in the middle of the yard. A trial trip was to be made on it in the afternoon.

First, however, one or two of us had to call on the mayor, an infirm old Chinese who could not move about without crutches. In his yamen we also made the acquaintance of the amiable, white-bearded deputy-mayor, NIAZ HAJI. We spoke of our wishes and plans, and the mayor repeated his warning against a trip to Kucha, where he thought fighting was now going on. Both of them afterwards sent a few sheep and some bread to our quarters.

Then we drove to the commandant's yamen. We were received in the courtyard by an adjutant, who omitted the invitation to come in and drink tea that is usually extended to distinguished guests. He informed us that the commandant had gone to Qara-shahr on horseback, and would not be returning for some days. We left our cards, and heard later from the mayor that the commandant *was* in Korla. Why he should want to hide from us neither we nor the mayor could understand. We met the adjutant, a Tungan of the arrogant type, once more that same evening.

In the afternoon YEW came to tell me that he had been asked to go and see CHANG, the commander of our escort from Turfan.

In an insolent and challenging tone CHANG had demanded that one of our lorries should be placed at his disposal the next morning, with petrol and a driver.

»You're going too slowly,» he said. »My comrades and I had orders from General MA CHUNG-YING to travel from Turfan to Aqsu in six days with his plan of operations. We have been on the road for eleven days now, and are only at Korla. I've just had a telephone message from Qara-shahr with orders from MA to take one of your cars and drive on ahead at all costs if I value my life.»

YEW had replied that he would ask me. He did so, agreeing with me that we could under no circumstances hand over a car to people who would certainly never return it.