

unarmed. All who had served under him and all who had helped him had been amply rewarded. He had got money from Urumchi. Where he was now no-one knew; and about YOLBARS KHAN they would say nothing. One old man said:

»We who have come up against the Tungans have lost everything. The only things we have left are our souls.»

At Chadir we rested for a while at a little tea-house close to the road. Here the mysterious fakir PLAWSKY turned up again. He had arrived two hours before us, coming straight from Korla. He told us that on the day we left Korla the whole garrison, one hundred and fifty strong, had suddenly started off northward in full marching order, and had entered the ravine of the Konche-darya. PLAWSKY had been told that they were on their way to a battle that was raging twenty li from Korla. They did not know against whom the fighting was. On the morning of March 8th still more had fled. PLAWSKY was a dubious source; but the news he gave us did not seem improbable.

It was past nine when we reached Charchi, having covered 120 km. This village was our camp No. 50.

So far the country had been absolutely quiet, and we had met only few travellers. Traffic was quite dead, and the sentries had no cause to rouse us. As long as I was awake I could hear the sentry singing under his breath. I listened to his quiet steps, and his ringing blows on a piece of wood with a clapper to frighten thieves and show that he was not sleeping.

On March 11th the air was grey and damp, and we could not see far. Mist hovered over the earth, as is usual during the winter in Eastern Turkistan. We could hardly realize that there were mountains to the north, although they were so close to us. We stopped for a few minutes at the first serai to pump a rider who had arrived from Korla the day before. He confirmed what we had already been told — that the whole Tungan garrison had marched northward a few days previously, bound for Qara-shahr, where a battle was in progress.

»Between whom?» I asked.

»Between Tungans and Kalmucks,» he replied. Kalmuck (Qalmaq) is the Turki name for the Mongolian Torguts. These were said to have made an attack on Qara-shahr to cut off Big Horse's relief and flight.

In the Korla oasis several villagers came along the road.

»What news? Is all quiet?»

»They say in the bazaar that Qara-shahr is besieged by Kalmucks, Russians and Turkis, and is being bombed from the air. There isn't a Tungan soldier left in Korla.»

It was probable that MA CHUNG-YING, after having evacuated his positions at Davan-ch'eng, had been shut up in Qara-shahr. If he was beaten here, too, his next stage would be Korla, and the little town would be overrun with his fleeing troops. In this case the first shattered hordes might burst in at any moment.