

Our only chance of safety was to hurry through Korla and make for the desert to the east at the greatest speed the vehicles could stand. There was no way round Korla. We *must* cross the river. There is only *one* bridge over the Konchedarya, and that is in the middle of Korla.

An apparently calm and sober Turki, answering my usual question, said:

»Yes, the garrison has left Korla. But there is talk of a small body of cavalry having orders to requisition as much flour, rice and corn as can be had from the outlying farmsteads, and to return to Qara-shahr this evening with its haul. A battle has been going on there for four days.»

»Are there no guards in the town? »

»Yes, ten Tungans; but only two of them have rifles.»

Another informant declared that there were twenty-two guards, all armed. The intelligence we were obtaining was thus contradictory, and our anxiety grew more intense. Should we succeed in driving through Korla unmolested?

At half-past two we stopped at the mayor's house in Korla and left our cards. The mayor, a sickly old Chinese, received us at once. The deputy-mayor, the white-bearded NIAZ HAJI, was with him. The usual questions were put. The two answered cautiously. They knew nothing definite. We could see that they were acutely uneasy, and I felt sorry for them. We should soon be far out in the eastern desert, but they were tied to their chairs of office. They were serving under MA CHUNG-YING, who might come at any moment. There might be bombings, a siege, fighting at Korla as there had been at Qara-shahr.

They gave us neither advice nor warnings when we told them our plan of disappearing into the desert. They were irresolute and dared not take any line. We rose to go. They pressed us to have a cup of tea. NIAZ HAJI went out, but returned immediately and sat down by my side. A servant appeared at the door, and said a few words about some new visit or message.

NIAZ HAJI turned to me with an assumption of indifference.

»There are some soldiers in the courtyard who say they want to speak to you. Will you see them? »

»Yes; let them come in.»

Four Tungan soldiers, with slung rifles and Mauser pistols at their sides, entered and stood by the door. They were cocksure in their bearing and speech, but polite. Their leader asked:

»Why have you come back here? And where are you going now? »

»We wanted to avoid the battle-front in the west. We are going to Hami now by a roundabout way, and shall return here when all is quiet.»

The leader now asked GEORG:

»Did you take CHANG and the eleven others safely to Kucha, or did something happen to them on the way? »