

Presently, we were confronted by another bridge over a canal 5 m wide. The maximum depth was 1.5 m. The bridge was not bad. It rested upon three solid timbers placed lengthwise; but the gaping intervals between them had to be filled. Our huge planks were again unloaded and the bridge strengthened. We had only a few hundred meters to go to the next bridge, the last in the Korla oasis on this side. Then we should be out on barren gravel desert and could drive hell-for-leather. Meantime, however, TSERAT had inspected the last bridge and reported that it had collapsed. We had thus either to build a new bridge or drive across the deep irrigation canal over which it led.

There seemed to be a curse upon us. It had taken us two solid hours to cover 3.5 km, and now we were held up by a bridge which was unfit for use! We had seen many wretched roads since leaving Kuei-hua, but this one beat all records. And this at a moment when our lives might depend on our getting out into the desert before the Tungans could mobilize their horsemen for a pursuit.

The road up to the last bridge was dry and good. On either side of it narrow irrigation canals ran between raised banks two feet high. Willows grew along the edge of it, forming an avenue. Beside the road were ploughed fields with scattered bushes and trees.

THE ATTACK

Four Tungan soldiers came riding along the bushes to our left. Another party appeared to our right. They were riding parallel with us, at a distance of about 200 m. They soon disappeared behind the scattered bushes.

»There's MA's cavalry come to requisition wheat in the villages,» said BERGMAN.

»No,» I replied, »they're shadowing us!«

At that moment a shot rang out.

»They're firing at us,» BERGMAN cried, snatching up his rifle. »Get out, quick! And keep low!«

We crawled out of the car, doubled up. I got out last. We took cover by the canal wall. Our marksmen held their rifles in readiness, but did not fire. Bullets were whining round us now. Before YEW and GEORG, who were standing side by side, could lie down under cover, a bullet whizzed between them. Fresh shots came whistling from both sides. Repeatedly we heard the dull thud of a bullet striking the willow trunks. A bullet snipped off a willow twig just over my head. Others passed through the cars and the provision cases. One went right through a box of melons; another, after striking some hard object, was found flattened on a petrol-tin. Luckily, none of the petrol-tanks was holed.

When the fusillade began I was terribly anxious. If they were firing at us they must mean to kill us. They were only waiting for us to reply; then, hidden