

KONCHE

The next day GEORG, KUNG, one of the Russian soldiers and I made a short preliminary tour of exploration to Konche or Yü-li-hsien, rather more than 30 km to the south, on the river Konche-darya.

Konche, a poor village sucked dry by the war, had never seen a car; and the whole population, consisting of perhaps a few hundred people, quickly assembled round the strange monster.

It was not hard to find our way to the yamen where the Chinese *amban* or district chief lived. This yamen was not a bad official residence, comprising several houses in the usual Chinese style, separated from one another by small square courtyards.

Tungans had three times in the course of the war descended on Konche, looting the village and forcing the *amban* to flee to the desert to save his life. He did not even ask what our business might be; nor did he ask to see our passports.

When we explained that we needed a dozen canoes he sent for a young Turki, who assured us that there were no boats at Konche at the moment, but that there were sure to be some in the Chong-köl region 35 km away. If we could give them twenty-four hours the boats could be fetched to Konche with both crew and oars.

Seeing this region again, that I had visited for the first time in the spring of 1896, made me think of the strange and inexplicable chances of life. I had little dreamed that I should once more find myself there thirty-eight long years later.

The river Konche-darya was quite imposing as it ran between its well-marked banks, covered here and there with bushes, with a long-shaped island near the right bank. I longed to be aboard the flotilla we had ordered, to be borne by the current and paddles through the once waterless desert to our distant goal, the mysterious Wandering Lake.

Dusk had fallen, and a new night was approaching. GEORG assured us that he could see our old tracks and follow them easily, even without headlights. But we had not got far before he got stuck fast in the mud. In vain he endeavoured to get the car up on firmer ground. Finally he had to go on foot to collect a few peasants, who quickly helped us to get the car out and put us on the right road. Then we lit our headlights, and soon reached our camp after a successful reconnaissance.

DIVIDING INTO TWO PARTIES

We spent April 3rd, too, at Shinega. The river-party — HUMMEL, KUNG, CHEN and myself, with two of the four Russian soldiers and a couple of Chinese servants — collected and packed our various belongings. We also engaged a Turki named URAYIM (IBRAHIM), who had been in BERGMAN's service in 1928. He was a skilful antelope hunter.