

could really be held to apply to exploratory work such as ours. The intercession of H.B.M.'s Minister at Peking had immediately been invoked from Kāshgar by my ever-watchful friend in a telegram sent over the Russian system via Irkeshtam. But it would be months before help from the distant capital could make itself felt. In the meantime I was faced by the prospect of having to contend, if not with an attempt at forcible interference, at any rate with Chinese passive obstruction easy enough to apply in my circumstances. I realized clearly how dangerous such obstruction would certainly be to my plans, particularly in view of the very limited period during which the cold of the winter renders work in the waterless desert possible.

Disquieting news from Kara-kum Ya-mên.

A copy of the edict arrived shortly after via Charkhlik from the Tungan Amban of Kara-kum. I had previously requested this official to furnish me with a Mongol interpreter in view of the explorations in the Etsin-gol region which I contemplated for the ensuing spring. Needless to say that an excuse for declining my request was conveniently provided by the enclosure. I could gauge the import of the edict and the vigour of its expression when I saw the sallow face of Li Ssü-yeh, my shrivelled Chinese Secretary—a poor substitute, alas! for ever zealous and plucky Chiang Ssü-yeh—turning a livid grey as he read through the document and explained it. Fortunately, ever taciturn and morose as he was, he could be trusted anyhow to keep the depressing information to himself.

Apprehension of local passive resistance.

Evening after evening as I came back from the day's work at the site I looked anxiously among the indolent Lopliks at the hamlet for the first signs of the passive resistance to my plans which their natural lethargic temperament would have made it so easy to practise. Yet the expected prohibition from Charkhlik never came. That I owed this lucky escape to the opportune 'revolutionary' outbreak became clear to me only later. It had disposed of the original district magistrate whose report on Lāl Singh's surveys as 'secret operations' had first supplied head-quarters with a pretext for their obstructive step, removing him before he could take any action. His bandit successor, who had found the orders when he installed himself at the Ya-mên and who, given time, might well have tried to curry favour at provincial head-quarters by showing zeal for their execution, had more urgent and profitable business to attend to before he was himself killed. Subsequently the military commandants, in strict compliance with Chinese official convention, had carefully abstained from looking into civil affairs and kept all official papers sealed up at the Ya-mên, until the new Amban should arrive from Urumchi. He did actually reach Charkhlik while I was still at Mīrān, but could not get access to the Ya-mên papers until he had formally taken charge of the seal of office. This the chief of the small force, a genial old warrior, whom I had met on his passage through Charkhlik, had for safety's sake taken along with him when, after attending to the execution of the last captured rebels, he had rapidly moved on towards Charchan; and thither, accordingly, the new *hsien-kuan* had himself been obliged to proceed.

Shēr 'Alī Khān's help with transport.

These latter circumstances, but imperfectly known to me at the time, had averted the direct obstruction I had such good reason to fear. But they also explain why the repeated and urgent appeals I addressed to Charkhlik for the indispensable camels remained utterly without effect. By great good fortune, help came at this juncture from a quarter whence I had the least reason to hope for it. The very day when Sir George Macartney's alarming message reached Mīrān, there arrived by the desert track from Tun-huang Shēr 'Alī Khān, the enterprising trader from Bajaor on the Indian North-west Frontier, whom I had met in 1907 at Tun-huang and whose readiness to convey to Kāshgar a mail for Europe had then been a welcome help to me.²⁵ Once again this hardy and intelligent Pathān (Fig. 111) was on one of his biennial journeys from distant Ssü-ch'üan to Yārkan with a caravan of over forty camels carrying chiefly tea. My relief at

²⁵ See *Desert Cathay*, ii. p. 68.