

»Military matters come before everything else!» exclaimed CHANG. »Nothing can be allowed to interfere with them. Nanking counts for nothing in a war in Sinkiang. For that matter, we are under Nanking too, and it ought to be in both your interest and Nanking's to help us.»

»It is specially laid down in our instructions that we are not to take sides in the internal conflicts in Sinkiang. I therefore refuse to hand over any of our cars.»

Clenching his teeth and white with anger, CHANG answered in a low-pitched, trembling voice:

»It makes no difference what you decide or refuse. The orders I have received from MA CHUNG-YING shall be obeyed. One of your cars must be at my door this evening!«

I gave a contemptuous laugh, rose abruptly and went out without taking leave of them. GEORG and YEW accompanied me, I showing the way with my electric torch. I came out into the street, where EFFE was waiting in the small car, opened the door and took my place on the back seat. YEW had his foot on the running-board and his hand on the handle ready to get in when three soldiers flung themselves on him from behind, forcibly pulling him down. He turned round and raised his arm to hit out in self-defence. I called out:

»Be quiet and go with them!«

So saying, I jumped out of the car. Two soldiers took YEW's arms in an iron grip, and two others jostled him back into the yard with their rifle butts. I was hardly out of the car before I was surrounded by more soldiers, who seized my wrists and pushed me the same way. EFFE, who had jumped out and slammed the door, was treated like us.

We were driven like cattle into the dark courtyard, where GEORG already stood bound. Here we three Swedes and YEW were surrounded by some forty officers and soldiers. Among the officers we recognized our detested escort from Turfan and the adjutant to the commandant of Korla. In all probability the commandant himself — who had been declared to be at Qara-shahr — was also there. CHANG, ashy pale and with rigid features, gave his orders curtly. He did not say much. Every soldier knew his part, which he had played often enough before, and at the expense of so many innocent lives.

Each of us was surrounded by half a dozen soldiers. They were in a hurry, and it all happened in the space of a few seconds. When someone is to be shot, nothing is gained by dawdling. The quicker the better, and then it is over.

A horny hand wrenched the electric torch out of my hand. One of the fellows ripped open my jacket with a violent jerk, and tugged it off, while another pulled my shirt up out of my trousers to draw it inside out over my head. One devilish robber held his pistol against my heart while this was being done. Strong hands seized my wrists, pulling them behind my back to bind them with a rope. YEW,