

GEORG is a giant, but it was too absurd that they could suppose he had lured their comrades into a trap. He replied with an ironical smile:

»I was alone and unarmed; they were twelve armed men. Of course I obeyed their orders.»

»Can you give us proof that they arrived safely at Kucha?»

With an airy, superior gesture GEORG held out CHANG's guarantee, signed by CHANG himself and bearing his red stamp, that he had shown us by the camp-fire near Bugur. The leader took the paper and talked with his men. None of them could read. The mayor offered his services and read the contents of the paper out aloud. The soldiers nodded their satisfaction, and asked if they might keep the guarantee. This request was firmly refused, and the paper was returned to GEORG's wallet. The men smiled, bowed and departed.

Hardly had they disappeared when we rose, thanked the two mayors and went out to the cars. In the courtyard GEORG observed:

»Now the four soldiers will go straight to the main guard and telephone to MA at Qara-shahr. If we lose any time we'll be caught.»

Something had happened behind the scenes during the half-hour in which we had been sitting with the mayor. NIAZ HAJI had sent a message to the main guard. This was why the soldiers had appeared at the right moment. The two mayors had done their duty; they thought above all of their own skins. The consequences of their proceedings were soon to show themselves.

TRYING TO GET AWAY

TSERAT and GEORG drove in front. Then came the small car with HUMMEL at the wheel, and lastly EFFE and JOMCHA. At the south gate of the town a cubical, deep-sunk stone stuck up out of the ground to support the two halves of the gate when they were shut at night. The small car could not clear this obstacle. One wheel had to go right over the stone; and short inclines of stones had to be built up on both sides to a level with its top. This took time. Outside the gate we were checked by a high wooden bridge over an *arig*, or irrigation canal. It was cleared, but a little farther on one of the lorries stuck in the mud on a flooded stretch of road. Further delay. The cars that followed made a detour over a ploughed field with nasty ditches.

At four o'clock we approached another canal bridge. It was rotten and weak, and had to be strengthened with our planks. It creaked, but held. Another flooded bit of road. The small car got water in its engine, and was towed out onto dry land by a lorry. We moved like a funeral procession along the willow avenue. Here GEORG stuck fast.