

by the bushes, they would go on firing as long as there was one of us left alive. The whole expedition would be wiped out; and MA might possibly have in his army enough drivers to manage five cars. But all our men lay under cover of the canal bank. I counted fifty shots, YEW fifty-five. The marksmen themselves were invisible.

When we did not answer the fire it gradually diminished. The fusillade had lasted for nine minutes, but they were minutes that seemed like hours, for our lives had hung by a thread the whole time. The pause grew longer and longer. What was going to happen next? We waited for a fresh volley. But it did not come. We peeped out cautiously from behind our cover. A soldier was approaching from the left. He was on foot and unarmed; evidently a negotiator. When still a stone's throw away he stopped, shouting a request that one of us should go and talk to him. KUNG asked if he might go. Certainly he might! He walked straight up to the soldier with his hands in his trouser pockets, smiling and looking at the ground. While they were talking several others joined the party. We could see soldiers in all directions. They had completely surrounded us. In a few minutes KUNG came back. Their ultimatum was as follows:

»According to express orders from General MA you had no right to leave Korla. If despite this you try to escape, we have orders to stop and arrest you at all costs and detain your cars. It is clear that you meant to get away unnoticed, as you did not even call on the commandant. You must return to the town immediately!»

I told KUNG to give the negotiator this answer:

»We did not call upon the commandant for two reasons: in the first place because he did not receive us on the occasion of our first visit, although — as we heard from a reliable quarter — he was in the yamen, and not at Qara-shahr as was pretended; and in the second place on account of the scandalous treatment we were exposed to in CHANG's quarters in the presence of the commandant's adjutant. We have no objection to returning to Korla, but as the drive is very dangerous even in daylight, it will be impossible in the dark. We shall therefore encamp here. The road is too narrow for the cars to be able to turn. You can post as many sentries as you like. We shall start back to town at sunrise.»

KUNG delivered the message and came back:

»They insist on our going back to Korla at once.»

It was only a little after half-past five when the retreat began. We had cause to be thankful — no-one killed, no-one wounded. But our hopes of finding peace and quiet in the Lop Desert had been shattered. To all human judgment it looked as if our destiny often depended on pure chance. If GEORG had been detained at Kucha we should not have stopped till we had found him; and then we too should have been taken and driven by stages to Kashgar with MA's