

»I think the first step that ought to be and can be taken is to make and maintain first-class motor-roads between China proper and Sinkiang. A railway line into the heart of Asia is the next step.»

We had a long and detailed conversation, and LIU asked me to call upon him at his office next day. On this occasion we went into the problem still more thoroughly; and finally the Minister asked me to draw up a memorandum and mark on the map the routes I considered most suitable.

In the middle of July I submitted my memorandum and map to LIU. The document was to be translated into Chinese, and Generalissimo CHIANG KAI-SHEK, the Prime Minister WANG CHING-WEI, and the Minister for Railways KU MENG-YÜ were each to receive a copy. I concentrated on the question of trade and communications. Russian trade had driven out the Chinese and was well on the way to killing the British trade from India. At Kashgar, Kulja, Chuguchaq, and in Altai the Russians were much closer and had excellent roads, which were continually being improved, right up to the frontiers of Sinkiang. Chinese trade, on the other hand, had from ancient times been mainly conducted by carts along the Imperial Highway to Hami, and by camel-caravans from Kuei-hua-ch'eng through the Gobi Desert to Ku-ch'eng-tze; and the caravans took three months over the journey. If motor-lorries were used instead the time would be reduced to ten or twelve days, and the Chinese could compete with some prospect of success. That things were already developing on these lines was shown by the fact that the merchants at Kuei-hua-ch'eng had formed a company for motor-lorry traffic between their town and Hami. But most of the first lorries despatched had been wrecked owing to the badness of the roads. The first thing to be done, therefore, was to lay down one motor-road across the Gobi Desert and another along the Imperial Highway through Kansu.

In my conversations with Assistant Foreign Minister LIU I never guessed what they would signify to me personally in the immediate future. Only NORIN, BEXELL and BÖKENKAMP were still in the field; and on their impending return to Peking we were all going home to begin work on the results of our great expedition.

But it was written otherwise in the stars! LIU went to Nanking at the end of July and laid my memorandum before the Generalissimo and the Prime Minister. It aroused their interest, and on August 3rd I received the following telegram:

»Mr WANG CHING-WEI, president of the Executive Yüan, wishes to meet you at Nanking as soon as possible. Please reply to LIU CHUNG-CHIEH.»

I now understood that my destiny was to take quite a new turn, and I was delighted at the prospect of doing the Chinese Government a service in return for all the hospitality I had received on Chinese soil ever since 1890. I certainly had some experience of Central Asia, and no-one could wish more sincerely than I