

through Turfan, Qara-shahr, Korla and Kucha was under MA CHUNG-YING's rule, and not that of Urumchi. We were neutrals, and had to adapt ourselves to the realities of the situation. If we had declared that we belonged to Urumchi, we should have been arrested.

»But now the war is decided, and I suppose the road to Urumchi is open. We want to go to the capital, with or without cars, and wait upon General SHENG SHIH-TS'AI.»

»I'll ask SHENG TUPAN if he will receive you.»

It then occurred to me that perhaps, after all, it might be better to postpone the visit to Urumchi as long as possible. That SHENG TUPAN was displeased with us for having lent his enemy our cars had been made clear the day before, for General BEKTEEV was under the command of the Governor-General, and his words were only an echo of SHENG TUPAN's opinions. We did not know what would happen to us at Urumchi. Perhaps we should be treated as spies and enemies, be deprived of all freedom of movement and arrested for an indefinite period.

I therefore turned the conversation into other channels. The general became interested and listened attentively. I had taken with me a large general map of Central Asia and large-scale maps of the Lop-nor area. More than half of our three and a half hours' conversation was devoted to the great communication and irrigation problems in Eastern Turkistan. In glowing words I depicted the magnificent prospects of the old Silk Road, along which, 2,000 years ago, huge caravans went to and fro through Asia, and on which countless bales of silk had been borne on camels from China to the Mediterranean coast, loaded onto triremes and taken to Rome. A government that in our own time, so long afterwards, revived this route, at one time the longest road in the world — not for caravan traffic now, but for motor-cars and for railways and locomotives — would achieve something whose splendour would not fade when centuries had passed. If we could contribute in any degree to the solution of this great road problem, we should be fulfilling one of the tasks that had brought our expedition to Sinkiang.

»I assure you,» I said, »that our aims are much higher than this miserable struggle for ephemeral power in the province of Sinkiang. From our point of view the war between SHENG TUPAN and MA CHUNG-YING is only a second ticked away on the clock of history. As we had landed in the middle of the war we had to watch its course closely for our own safety's sake. But our intentions are peaceful. Our task is to raise and help the people, their trade and the lines of communication between the oases. It amazes me that anyone could think we came here to take part in a war that we thought was over, and whose result does not affect our task in the slightest degree.»

The general listened attentively. Then he said: