

»Yes, I thought nearly all the time that it was our last drive. But when he was at his most charming, and promising us anything we chose to ask as soon as he'd captured the whole of Sinkiang, I felt that such a decent, generous fellow couldn't possibly mean to do us any harm, least of all when it was we who had helped him to get away from the northern army. But when I think of the whole business I feel that only God's infinite mercy brought us out of it alive.»

»Did he ask you anything about our expedition? »

»Yes; I had to tell him all about its organization and aims. He thought it a wise and necessary thing to make motor-roads through the Gobi to Sinkiang and in the province. He wanted to know how many of us there were, and what each of us had to do. He knew our chief had travelled a lot in Sinkiang and Tibet, and was sorry not to have met him. One thing he couldn't understand was how a man of nearly seventy could stand such a hard journey as ours.»

At the outset of their adventurous drive Big Horse went up to GEORG, smilingly held out his hand, and greeted him as a comrade, without a trace of embarrassment.

»I am sincerely sorry,» he said; »I deeply regret that I have been obliged to take the expedition's cars, but circumstances have compelled me to do so. I hope I shall not cause your chief too much inconvenience during the time I have to keep them.»

GEORG SÖDERBOM, who had grown up in the diplomatic school of Far Eastern life, put on his broadest smile, bowed, and assured MA in flowery language that the four drivers felt honoured to serve so great and mighty a commander.

»When I saw that Big Horse's disposition was friendly,» GEORG said, »I took the opportunity of making a good impression on him and winning his confidence and friendship. The wounded general of cavalry MA had driven in my car; and I asked how he felt, and whether the jolting on the bad road had been painful to his leg. The wounded man declared that he felt pretty fit, and that we could drive as fast as we liked. Some of the officers who had driven in TSERAT's and JOMCHA's lorries looked surly and eyed me threateningly. But I joked with them, and told them how sea-sick CHANG and his crowd had been when I drove them to Kucha on the 6th of March. The officers laughed, and the atmosphere became jolly and cheerful.»

Sometimes MA would shout through the window to retreating soldiers, asking them where they had last spent the night, or if they had found anything to eat. But there were no long conversations. He talked quite openly to EFFE, who got the impression that he was unconcerned at his defeat and convinced that his retreat from Dzungaria and the Turfan basin was of no importance as long as he still held Eastern Turkistan.

»The northern army could never have driven me from Urumchi, Davan-ch'eng and Turfan,» he said, »if it hadn't been for Russian help. It wasn't easy for my