

of Abdar, where we pitched our tents in the desert after having covered about 80 km.

On the morning of December 19th the atmosphere was so wonderfully clear that even the mountains on the far western horizon stood out sharply defined. We followed a track that had been worn and torn by camels' pads on ground as hard and firm as the finest concrete; and here for short stretches we could drive at over 50 km an hour. If the road to Sinkiang was like this all the way there would be no need for any road-making.

Abdar, »The Box«, raised its broken pyramid over the surrounding plain; and in a range farther south a hill with two peaks stood out like a two-humped camel. The road then led through a ravine, with red terraces wrought into fantastic shapes by erosion and the wind. Weather-worn stones were abundant. We lost ourselves in a labyrinth of red and black, terraced hills; emerged by degrees from their curiously winding corridors; and were back in the hard, level gravel desert, with a belt of sand-dunes to the south. We had just crossed the frontier of the republic of Outer Mongolia. The Yingen Well, the goal of our day's journey, lay on the very border-line.

We had to cross several dry, sandy ravines in which the lorries stuck fast. The long, foot-wide canvas mats were brought out and stretched on the sand to give the wheels a grip again, but in some cases we had to unload the lorries before they could pass the soft spots.

So the convoy rolled on. It was breathlessly still, with a blue and cloudless sky. Not a soul was to be seen, not a sound to be heard. This was the true Gobi, the desert, the home of silence. On the north-western horizon the low, jagged mountains hovered as in a mirage, like a row of black pearls without contact with the earth.

YINGEN-KHUDUK

We pitched camp on sandy soil by the Yingen (She-camel) Wells. The northern well is situated in Outer and the southern well in Inner Mongolia. There were plenty of saxaules in the sand round the wells; and just as it was growing dark, jolly young EFFE lighted a bonfire. It might have been a challenge to all Mongol frontier-riders who might happen to be roaming about in the neighbourhood. Travellers may fare badly if they fall into the hands of a large enough body of Outer Mongolian frontier-guards. But we saw no-one. Although it was flying in the face of destiny, we decided to stop at Yingen for a day, as CHEN was to determine the astronomical co-ordinates of the place. This being finished, we left the sand-belt and reached hard ground again. Utterly barren, red hills, small cairns, and occasional skeletons of camels marked the road. There was not a sign of life.