

still 220 km from the Edsen-gol. All the same, perhaps we should reach our desert river by Christmas Eve! So when we had read the most important of the packet of letters that GEORG had brought and made sure that all was well at home, we took our places and drove on westward.

OVER THE GRAVEL WASTES

Khara-muck-shandai is a well in an absolutely desolate region. On our left to the south rose a terrace; and beyond that reappeared the long depression that we had seen on the previous day. Flat gravel surfaces extended between dark hills. Vultures were making a good meal of a camel not long dead. Passing among knolls and mounds and over black lava-beds, we drove up a very steep slope. On the other side of the ridge lay a broad plain. Then we crossed a large, dry river-bed running in the direction of the long depression to the south. Not a plant was to be seen. The road was marked by small cairns, always erected on hillocks. Some of them were crowned with camels' skulls.

Nogo-orobok is a well in a belt of sand, and here we once again saw scrub growing on mounds. The plain extended to the foot of a chain of mountains to the north, called the Tsaghan-ul or »White Mountain».

We obtained water for the night at the Bilcher well. The road went in among black ridges and sharp slate rocks. Often these rose in picturesque, jet-black pyramids, covered at the foot with yellowish sand. The day was waning, and the shadows spread over this dreary moon-landscape.

At Deresun-khuduk stood one of the Kuei-hua omnibus company's lorries, shabby and abandoned. There were also dumps of hides from Sinkiang and petrol from Kuei-hua. A Chinese merchant ruled over three yurts and a few Khalkha Mongols had found their way there to make their purchases.

We had covered just 100 km when we encamped for the night. It seemed absurd that we could not do more in a whole day. And that day's journey, on the shortest day of the year, was the longest we had made so far. But just try the roads of Central Asia! And on top of that there was the map-making which took up so much time.

The tents had hardly been pitched before all our travellers took out the letters they had received from their homes. It was quiet that evening in our airy dwellings; everyone was reading. With joy and gratitude I read in a communication from home that the Swedish Government had granted the last subsidy I had applied for from Peking to wind up the big expedition.

On the clear morning of December 23rd the mountain Yagan-khairkhan raised its sacred peaks ahead of us. In Mongolia it is unlucky to utter the name of a holy mountain. One may say *khairkhan* («the Gracious»), but not the name it-