

That we here, in the heart of this hateful desert, should thus light upon all the necessaries of travel that a caravan requires, can only be described as in the highest degree strange and amazing — namely, kamisch, grazing, fuel, and fresh water, and also, had our provisions given out, roast hare! When I started from Jangi-köl, I never even dreamed of such a thing. Possibly, as is indicated on an older edition of the map of Central Asia by the Russian general staff, anciently a road did run diagonally through the desert from Tattran to Korla, for that route cannot have been inserted by mere chance.* Yet the people who live both north and south of the desert have no knowledge, or even any tradition, that there once existed any such line of communication, and even if there did exist some such route in the days of dim antiquity, it can only have followed the direction we were travelling in, for, as I have already said, it is impossible to journey from south to north because of the steep thresholds or isthmuses of sand that separate the bajirs one from another.

All day long the wind blew from the east-north-east, and in the evening there was not a single star visible. A winter's night, such as that which followed, without moonshine, without starlight, is indeed a thick darkness that may be felt.

Beside the well we had dug we indulged ourselves and the camels with a day's rest, and during it the wind blew hard from the east. Having no tents, we sought shelter under the steep dune-slope on the east, and as all our effects lay out in the open, I was able to observe the gradual approach of the drift-sand towards them, and it was not long before they were covered with a thin coating of sand. It was however only close to the earth that the wind blew from this direction, for heavy clouds were driving with great velocity from west to east, or in exactly the opposite direction. The water continued to trickle out into our well all night, and in the morning was encrusted with a thin sheet of ice; and not only the sides of the well, but also the sand which was thrown out of it, were alike frozen as hard as a stone. This last was only to a slight extent intermingled with clayey matter; whereas in the wells we dug in the more northerly bajirs the fine saliferous matter predominated and the proportion of sand was quite small. The water in these wells rests upon a layer of clay, and when you have dug down to that, it begins to trickle out from the lowest layer of sand. Both nights that we spent in this spot our camp was visited by a fox, which approached quite close to us. Strange that this creature, as well as the wolf, should advance so far into the desert where there is no water. No doubt it is the hares that tempt them, for next day whilst on the march we saw numbers of these animals; they appeared able to subsist without water. Another very common animal is a species of small rodent, a kind of earth-rat,

* The particular sheet of this map which lies before me as I write, namely that for the eastern half of East Turkestan, possesses neither title nor date, but it appears to have been published in 1878 or later, for it shows the discoveries made by Prschevalskij on his first journey to the Lop-nor region. The route in question follows an almost straight line from Korla to Tschertschen, and consequently crosses the Ugen-darja and the Tarim above Karaul, and then passes by the »well of Tartang» about 50 versts north of Tschertschen. Tartang is of course identical with Tattran. Wherever the Russian topographers may have derived their information from with regard to this mysterious route, leading diagonally across the desert, it is at any rate a matter of great interest, and it is not at all unlikely that in former times the desert was crossed along some such line.