

»How could you know that I should be rowing down the river on this particular day?»

»Well, it's nearly a month since someone told me, in my hut at Chara, that you were back in Korla at last. When we parted at Kashgar thirty-two years ago, you promised to come back to us again some day. We waited and waited, but you never came. Many of your servants from those days are dead; but some are still alive. And now I am glad that my wish has been fulfilled at last.»

This ÖRDEK had entered my service in November 1899, when I was travelling down the Tarim river by boat, and soon afterwards stuck fast in the winter ice. He was also one of the four men who took part in the crossing of the Taklamakan Desert between Yangi-köl and Tatan, on the Charchan-darya. He took part likewise — in March, 1900 — in our great march along the dry bed of the Quruq-darya. And he played an honourable part in the discovery of the ruins of Lou-lan on March 28th in the same year.

The sun was setting. Old ÖRDEK clambered up the bank, got into his saddle and galloped ahead with his son. He was to choose a suitable camping-ground for us, where fuel was to be had.

The river here flowed south-east in an almost straight line; and before the last gleam of daylight had faded we reached the place where the two riders had tethered their horses. With a couple of boughs as rakes they were clearing away twigs and brushwood to make a camping-ground right on the edge of the river. The wooded region hereabouts was called Uzun-bulung, »Long Bend».

After the month of tension we had spent at Korla, guarded by soldiers, it was a delightful feeling to be out in God's air again and see the fires blazing in the darkness. My first map-sheet looked promising, and I rejoiced in the thought that we were now at last on the way to that capriciously wandering lake that NILS HÖRNER was so far the only European to have seen.

THE WINDING RIVER

Striking camp is much simpler on a river-trip than on a caravan journey. Boxes are packed, sleeping-bags and tents rolled up, and everything is stowed away in its usual place on board. Before one has time to turn round everything is ready, the paddles are thrust against the bank, and the canoes glide out into the current, to be carried down by the ceaselessly moving stream.

The peculiar landscape, silent and impressive, spread its contours and colours in the morning light. The sky was brilliantly clear. On the banks were patches of woodland, scanty and wild, amid the dry undergrowth of bushes and reeds. The sky alone was as blue as its reflection in the river; all else was grey, with dashes of brown and yellow. The trees were still leafless, but buds had begun to appear.