

a grey-green hue that was caused by the continuous landslips from the banks. A little grove of moribund poplars was drawing new life from the stream's return. Here and there we saw dead trunks, grey and dried up; and in midstream branches and twigs, stranded on hidden sandbanks, stuck up out of the river. About half the bed of the stream consisted of sandbanks; and at low water, as at this time, they were exposed to full view.

Late in the afternoon the river flowed through a belt of bare sand-dunes, about 6 m high. The stream washed their feet, and the sand slipped down to be carried away by the current and form new sandbanks. On the top of a dune three graceful antelopes were silhouetted against the sky. For a few seconds they stood still, paralysed with astonishment; then, swift as the wind, they made off with elastic bounds, and disappeared.

In places there was no vegetation for some distance and we were surrounded by sheer desert on all sides. The river had a tendency to expand into wide, lake-like stretches, in which it was hard to follow the channel, indeed, to find one's way at all. The banks ahead of us seemed to form solid land; but the boatmen had a flair for keeping their course, and quite unexpectedly I would find myself gliding round a promontory, beyond which a new reach opened. The stream now ran straight for some distance. The air was hazy, and river and sky seemed to melt into one.

Our first day on the new, historic river had come to an end. I was happy and grateful to feel that after NORIN's valuable reconnaissance on the left bank and AMBOLT's precise astronomical and geodetic observations I was the first to map the whole river, and see with my own eyes that my predictions of 1901 had really proved correct. This gave me a feeling that the Qum-darya, dry or wet, was *my* river. It was almost awe-inspiring to follow its turbid waters into the heart of the desert that I had been fortunate enough to conquer thirty-four years earlier. Lower down, our boats would be gliding over the tracks of my own camels in the now pathless river-bed. These had indeed been obliterated by the hard easterly storms of at least twenty years; yet it was just this river-bed that my caravan had crossed now and again in March, 1900.

Towards nightfall the sky cleared and the eternal stars shone out over our camp. The smoke from the cook's and boatmen's fires rose up towards them, and we were encompassed by the mysterious infinity of the silent desert.

The following day, after a few hours' paddling, we reached the point where the caravan route from Turfan to Tikenliq crosses the river, quite near Ying-p'an, where the Chinese had a fort and a temple on the old Silk Road many centuries ago. On February 20th, 1928, at Turfan, I had heard for the first time that the road from that town to Tikenliq crossed, near Ying-p'an, a river so broad that a ferry-boat had to be used. (See Part I pp. 237 f). I realized then that the waters of the Tarim system had returned to their old bed, the bed that farther eastward is split up into a delta to the north of the ancient city of Lou-lan.