

That evening we had quite an adventurous landing. The river ahead of us divided, passing on either side of an island. My boat went badly aground. Two of the others passed us, landing out of sight on the northern shore of the island. Three of the boats had stopped on the right bank a good way above us. When we got clear we paddled up to them against a rather strong current, reaching them just as night was falling. It became pitch dark, and the kitchen-boat, with CHIA KUEI, the Russian soldier ERASHIN and two paddlers, was still missing. They signalled to us with gun-shots from a long way upstream. We replied by lighting a fire on the bank. Evidently they were aground, and could not get clear in the darkness. They stayed there all night, sleeping on board. The worst of it was that the whole kitchen section was on board their boat. But CHEN, ever provident, had a supply of grape-nuts, cocoa and marmalade in his boat; so we fared excellently without our cook.

Next morning we assembled our scattered flotilla, and the kitchen-boat turned up along with the others. The river split up in two. We chose the left arm, which follows the gravel plain, called by the Turkis *sai*, at the southern foot of the Quruqtagh. The arm was narrow, being only 30 m across, and ran straight and deep as a canal between tamarisk mounds, blocks of clay and reeds. On the right bank we saw a *satma* and a sheepfold.

Four wild pigs, and soon after five more, dashed off as we came gliding past the bed of reeds in which they had been peacefully grubbing for roots. There was a snapping and crashing of dry reeds as they set off in wild flight and disappeared out of range of ERASHIN's gun.

Presently we were passing a sharp-cut promontory where the arm joined the stream again. An eddying whirlpool was formed at its base, and the boatmen had to be careful. We got safely past, however, and glided into another arm scarcely 40 m wide, where we pitched camp at twilight.

RENDEZ-VOUS IN THE DESERT

April 24th was an exciting day. In the morning our boatmen had discovered the tracks of motor-wheels not far from the left bank, as well as the footprints of five men who had been out scouting. So the motor-convoy had passed, and it was not far to the neighbourhood of the spring Yardang-bulaq, which was our rendez-vous.

At about four o'clock the flotilla was gliding quite peacefully down the river, at that place a hundred meters wide, when the singing of our boatmen suddenly gave place to a lively discussion. CHIA KUEI and ERASHIN were standing up and looking to the north-east over the dark *sai*, the edge of which was visible about 500 m off from the river.