

At six o'clock we were paddling through reeds that grew thicker and thicker, and now usually concealed the banks of solid clay; but long 'jetties' of mud, deposited by high water in autumn, were visible here and there.

The channel continued to grow wider, and was presently as much as 120 to 150 m across. Two eagles regarded us with attention. Gulls and terns hovered about us, and little birds twittered over the reeds. Flocks of ducks rose once or twice. There was more wild life than before; down here the fresh water from the Qum-darya had discharged its life-giving mission with greater vigour.

In a little while, however, the reeds grew thinner, and at last almost ceased. Now the dark clay banks, quite bare, lay to right and left of us. No more *mesas* were to be seen, scarcely even an isolated *yardang* some distance from the water. We were in a transitional region between the *yardangs* and the salt-encrusted clay, or old dried-up salt sludge, which is called *shor*. The arm of the river grew wider and shallower. Among the reeds the depth had been 3 m; now it was only one. We were continually touching ground, and the boatmen had to toil and push with their paddles to get us off.

As twilight came on SADIQ tried to bring my boat to the left bank. Impossible. He tried the right. Equally shallow everywhere. It grew dark. A small crescent moon was up, but gave only a feeble light.

At last, as the result of much shoving and wriggling we reached the right bank and landed on *shor* as hard as brick, where not a blade of grass was to be seen and not one stick of driftwood had come ashore. With difficulty we found a level surface large enough for the tent. A deck plank was sacrificed to our evening fire and supper.

When we stepped out of the tent on the morning of May 16th we were at last able to get our bearings in this most interesting and peculiar landscape. We were quite near the point where the Qum-darya, or the main arm of its delta, ran into Lop-nor; and the northernmost part of the famous lake lay spread out to the south-east like an inlet of the sea. Gulls flew screaming over the tent and river, frightened or angered at the arrival of men in their peaceful fishing waters. They contributed to the illusion of a sea-shore. No vegetation in sight — all was desolation and death.

OUT ONTO THE LAKE

A fresh breeze was blowing, and again we had to wait. Meantime, however, we made all preparations for a start. CHEN and I were to travel in the largest canoe with two paddlers; in two of the smaller canoes, each propelled by one paddler, we had provisions, two tins of fresh water, and fur coats. We did not take the tent; it was left at camp No. 82, where CHIA KUEI had to await our return all alone. A sheep was slaughtered and we took the meat with us.