

Our plan was to steer out onto the lake, follow its eastern bank southwards, cross the wide southern basin and paddle back northward along the western bank. Our men thought they could paddle us 50 km a day in still weather. If we were caught in a storm in the middle of the lake, we were lost. The investigations of HÖRNER and CHEN had shown that the banks were so shelving and soft that it would probably be impossible to land. At nightfall, therefore, we intended to fasten the three canoes together and sleep in them. I was anxious to find out whether the new Lop-nor had changed its shape in three years, and whether its configuration was now different from what it had been when HÖRNER and CHEN made their map. Now, with the summer coming on, and the volume of water carried to the lake down the Qum-darya decreasing daily, Lop-nor would be smaller; HÖRNER and CHEN had been there in winter, after the autumn flood had filled the lake.

At about midday the wind dropped. We took leave of the solitary CHIA KUEI and proceeded down the shallow river. As we now had single canoes and a light cargo we got over the shallows — with a good deal of bottom-scraping — and steered south-east.

At 1.45 we glided out onto the lake, whose shores seemed to retreat before us. We steered S. S. E., making for a darkish cape on the eastern shore; but we were continually forced off our course by the shallowness of the water.

I felt myself in fairyland out on the waters of that lake-sanctuary, on which no boat had ever moved before! It was now dead still; the surface of the water was like a mirror. Some way off ducks were swimming, while gulls and other sea-birds uttered their cries of warning. In the south-east we saw a row of black lumps, evidently hillocks on a pier-shaped tongue of land. The mirage made them appear to be hovering above the horizon — a phenomenon we knew so well from the Gobi Desert. Due south and south-west the horizon was quite clear, and sky and water met just as on the open sea. In the S. S. W. was what looked like a string of Zeppelins flying over Lop-nor. Closer, in the south-east, black objects shaped like horsemen, grazing cattle and camels stood out. But their only motion was a quivering vibration caused by the heated air as it ascended.

The farther south we went the shallower became the water. Two of the men waded, towing the canoe behind them, while the two others, who had left their boats stranded, pushed from behind. Black streaks of mud appeared on the surface behind the boats. The sun blazed hotly down, and the light was blinding. The water shone opaline and steel-grey in the west, but a bright sea-blue in the south and east.

We sought vainly for a deeper channel. We steered west, while BABEDDIN »put up» a fish, running in pursuit of it with his paddle lifted above his head like a spear. He struck again and again with the broad, sharp blade, and the fish leapt till the water spouted round it. Another blow, and BABEDDIN bent down victor-