

## FALLING WATER-LEVEL

The day was brilliantly clear; only in the north-west a few light clouds hovered over the earth. There was a faint N. N. E. breeze, which had a pleasant cooling effect. The cloth stretched above my »writing-table» broke the worst heat of the sun. Now and then a gadfly came buzzing like a miniature aeroplane; but mosquitoes kept away as long as the breeze lasted.

We made our way back to the old fort (STEIN'S L. E.) through the same lakes and canals we had traversed before.

All these lakes along the riverside and in the delta take their toll of the Qum-darya in the autumn before any water gets down to Lop-nor; and the evaporation from them is very great.

The water had fallen since we paddled through this channel for the first time; so it was even harder work than before to force, push and drag the canoes forward through the narrow passages, with tamarisk boughs and reed stems snapping, crackling and crashing along their sides. We moved forward inch by inch. It was risky to have things lying about in the boats — they might be swept overboard. Once all the baggage had to be carried through a narrow, shallow passage.

May 25th dawned. It was the last day of that unforgettable journey to Lopnor. We had not far to go to camp No. 80, where we had left GAGARIN and three boatmen, and where a couple of herdsmen, with sheep for us, ought to have arrived during our absence. But before reaching camp we had still one task to fulfil — an exact measurement of the volume of water in the Qum-darya at the lowest point at which the river was still clearly discernible and running in one bed.

We had no difficulty in finding this vital point in a landscape of *mesas* wrought by the wind into splendid and picturesque shapes, resembling fortresses and towers. Among them the river flowed in a sharply defined bed, and was divided into two arms by a narrow, oblong island. The river at this point carried 30.5 cub.m a second, a volume of water of which the greater part goes to Lop-nor, but which now, at the beginning of summer, was falling lower day by day.

## THE END OF THE BOAT JOURNEY

It was past three when we ceased work, and then we covered the last lap to our base camp. We approached the little island by intricate channels. We saw the tent in silhouette against the sky. Our boatmen wanted to play a trick on the campers by stealing upon them stealthily, like pirates. They dipped the paddles noiselessly, and did not utter a sound. But in fact it was we who were surprised. Not a living soul was to be seen at the camp. Ah, there came Tagil,