

(Map No. 35. B, C. 4), and which on a still vaster scale extend along the Bēsh-toghraq valley, that eastern arm of the ancient Lop sea (Map Nos. 32. D. 4; 35. A, B. 4).

I have already indicated above the striking similarity between the route passing up the Etsin-gol from the heart of Mongolia and that ancient Chinese highway which once led through the Lop desert past Lou-lan and the Kuruk-daryā into the Tārīm basin. Once the traveller had left the terminal river-courses facilitating the use of both routes, the ground to be crossed by him was, indeed, very different in essential physical features. On the ancient Lou-lan route the terrible waterless waste of the salt-encrusted Lop sea-bed lay beyond, and with that the difficulties presented by the route which leads north of the Gashun-nōr across the gravel plateaus and southernmost hill ranges of the Altai, barren as these are, can bear no comparison. But apart from this difference in the conditions prevailing farther on, everything that met my eyes in this Etsin-gol delta after a succession of low-water seasons seemed as if meant to bring before me the appearance that the delta of the dying Kuruk-daryā around ancient Lou-lan may have presented to those who made their way through it before its final abandonment.

Route up  
Etsin-gol  
from  
Mongolia.

There were the river branches still 'in being', left dry for almost all the year but yet carrying enough water below the surface to maintain fine groves of Toghraqs and luxuriant scrub along their banks. But where beds had received no water for a series of years, as had happened with the Ovang-gol (Map No. 44. C. 4), tamarisks were growing only on cones, and many of the wild poplars were dying. Wide stretches of ground separating the several beds retained only thin scrub, no longer fit for grazing by sheep or herds of cattle. Much of the ground near the terminal lakes was still covered with reeds; but sad complaints were heard in the scattered camps of the reduction of the pasture here owing to the inadequate floods of the last few years, and of the danger of the same fate overtaking the grazing in the riverine jungle belts.

Recent  
reduction  
of grazing.

It seemed as if 'desiccation' were casting its shadow ahead upon this ground, and as if the Mongols occupying it were beginning to be conscious of it. Yet the present population of about two hundred Torgut families who permanently use the grazing grounds on the Etsin-gol is thin enough, considering the total extent of the area. The restriction of the available grazing; the civilizing influence exercised by Chinese traffic passing along the route to carry food-stuffs to the Mongol tribes northward; the necessity of resorting to wells and in the matter of worship to permanent timber-built shrines,—all these influences had manifestly affected their ways of life. We were therefore in presence of conditions here such as probably prevailed among the indigenous population of Lou-lan, originally all hunters and herdsmen, during the centuries which elapsed between the first opening of the trade route through that region and its final abandonment. It seemed an impressive illustration of the fact that similar geographical conditions may bring about similar changes in physical and human surroundings in periods of history widely separated.

Conditions  
compared  
with those  
of Lou-lan.

## SECTION II.—KHARA-KHOTO AND ITS REMAINS

Willing as I found the 'Beili' of the Torguts to give such help as he could towards our proposed work at the ruins of Khara-khoto, the raising of a minimum number of Mongols to help in the expected excavations was a matter of difficulty. Their camps were widely scattered, and such men as could be spared from looking after flocks and herds were by no means anxious to forsake their ease for work in the heat of the sun, generous as was the pay I offered. However, by the morning of May 26th a dozen young fellows turned up (Fig. 239); and as camels had also been secured to carry our *impedimenta* and the needful supply of water, we were able to start for the site.

Start for  
Khara-  
khoto.

Our Mongols found it convenient first to take us back to Dzusulun-tsakha, and there spare supplies, &c., were left behind. We then crossed the Ümne-gol bed, here about 300 yards wide,