

2 to 4 feet. These, together with the dust haze which accompanied us since leaving Shindī, made it abundantly clear that erosion by the wind had its share, though a minor one, besides decomposition and erosion by water in the creation of the surface forms of this dreary Kuruk-tāgh region. Farther on the stony Sai became absolutely barren, except where the Chikanda shrub could be seen in the wide shallow beds that we had to cross in succession. They all joined a big depression skirting the foot of the Charchak hills and draining towards Yārdang-bulak. In one of the flood-beds dusk obliged us to halt for the night.

Until we approached close up to this point we had been able to follow the trail, still fresh looking, of a small party of hunters from Tikenlik whom Muḥammad Bāqir knew of as having shot a wild camel, apparently towards the end of December, near the south-eastern extremity of the Charchak-tāgh. Before reaching our camping-place we noticed a wild camel's track running for some distance close along this trail and evidently quite recent. This led to our guide offering an observation which was not without a certain antiquarian interest. On his own hunting expeditions, he said, he had noticed in those parts of the Kuruk-tāgh which wild camels visit that the animals are often in the habit of keeping close to the hunters' trails leading from one salt spring to another. Needless to say that the wild camels, with their extraordinary sense of locality and keen scent, do not adopt this habit from any need of such human guidance. Whatever the explanation of it might be, and Muḥammad Bāqir was not able to offer any, he was positive in asserting from his personal experience that the wild camel was not afraid of human trails if these are more than a few days old. This information was of interest as supporting what had suggested itself to me, when following the line of the ancient Lou-lan route along the shore of the ancient Lop Sea north-west of Kumkuduk, as regards the significance of the much-trodden track of wild camels that keeps to it.<sup>7</sup> It may be also recorded here that according to the information received by Muhammad Bāqir from his father wild camels were in the latter's youth frequently to be found as far west as the Kavūta valley, while now the vicinity of Charchak-tāgh and Yārdang-bulak is the western limit of their haunts in the Kuruk-tāgh.

On the morning of March 4th we had marched only about six miles over ground as utterly barren as before, and crossed a low decayed ridge between two wide flood-beds, when almost suddenly we dropped down into a well-defined hollow sheltering the reed-beds which the salt spring of *Yārdang-bulak*, or *Dolān-achchik* as it is also known to the Singer people, provides with moisture. They extend for about 500 yards from north to south with a width of about 150 yards across the middle. The salt spring rises about 300 yards from their northern end, and the ice sheet it had formed stopped just where we camped close to the lower end. I knew from Muḥammad Bāqir's statement and the account of Dr. Hedin who had visited Yārdang-bulak on his first journey to Lou-lan in 1900, that grazing was better here than at Yaka-yārdang-bulak, the other salt spring near to the Kuruk-daryā bed. So I decided to allow here the day of halt of which our camels and men were in need, before starting for the exploration of the cemetery sites that Lāl Singh had discovered on his march along the Kuruk-daryā in February, 1914.

There was plenty of work to keep us all busy while the camels and ponies were enjoying their grazing, coarse as it was: the men had repairs of all sorts to do, and I myself much writing and map inking. There were anxious thoughts, too, to keep my mind occupied. Apart from the persistent dust haze which I knew must be seriously impending Lāl Singh's triangulation in the hills of the western Kuruk-tāgh, I was in suspense also with regard to Afrāz-gul. If he had been able safely to overcome the difficulties and risks attending his survey along the western shore of the Lop seabed and across the sands of the Lop Desert, he ought about this time to be passing Yārdang-bulak.

<sup>7</sup> See above, i. pp. 316 sq.