

before for our coming, but now he dared not leave the camels.

The old man confirmed what we had heard before, that it was possible to skirt the Kevir either on the north or on the south; but to travel straight eastward from Kuh-i-nakshir he considered quite impossible, for in only two days' journey an expanse of salt desert was reached which, apparently firm and level as a floor, really consisted of soft soaked mud, wherein men and animals would sink up to the neck and be irretrievably lost. They are dead men who go thither, he said. Fifteen years ago a sa'ab (sahib, European) had been here with the intention of going out into the Kevir, but had returned when he found that it was no easy matter. We must keep south-westwards to a place called Dere-i-solamat.

This year the weather was very favourable, but three years ago there had been continuous rain and snow, both very unfavourable for camels; after rain the ground becomes smooth and slippery, and if it rains six days on end, as happened then, the animals cannot reach their pasturage on the steppe.

After following us for a while the old man returned to his fuel-gathering; how dreary his life must be year after year among camels without the least variation or opportunity of enjoyment!

We leave the dale, pass over a low ridge, and come out on to almost level steppe, where two wild asses fly westwards in a cloud of dust. I had my glass at hand, but the distance was so great that I could not obtain a clear view of them; they were like kulans, but they seemed far shyer than the wild asses of Tibet. A small erosion furrow leads us to the south-south-east; it runs to the Kevir, the margin of which will force us to entirely change our direction. It is evident that we must go round the salt desert, for at a distance we can see that it is impenetrable, that it is like a lake, that its surface will not bear, and we are rapidly approaching its shore.

The steppe character becomes more pronounced, the country becomes flatter, only at some distance to the side are seen slight undulations; even after five hours' march