

desert, and whether it was possible to make a start. At the same time Ali Murat betook himself with his four camels to a place among the hillocks where some scanty steppe shrubs grew, and where he would also look for firewood. I was therefore left quite alone in the space round this wretched well, which yielded no water, and outside which Nevengk sunned himself in the wind. The sky had become quite clear, and the sun together with the wind would soon dry up the upper layer of the desert—so I hoped. The dog lay quiet and silent during the four hours we were left together. There was no sign of life in this dreary waste, the outermost reef on the way to the desert sea.

I breakfasted on pistachios, lay and read a French novel, made notes, and, map in hand, mused over the adverse fate which kept me bound just at the margin of this desert I had hoped to overcome with such ease. It had closed its gates on my very nose, just as a bridge which is raised at the moment one is about to cross it. I went out again to look round, delighting in the wind which was doing its best to neutralize the effect of the rain.

At length Nevengk began to growl and bark. Ali Murat came tramping up with his camels loaded with capital firewood, dry stems of saxaul, and he immediately made up a fire, as it began to feel cool again in our hole. In the midst of the smoke and dust I drew, having nothing else to do, my honest guide, and the portrait was not yet finished when Gulam Hussein came in and declared that it would be quite impossible to cross the Kevir for three or four days, and then only if it did not begin to rain again. As an undeniable proof, he had brought with him a lump of the mud to show me. He had tried to go out a bit into the Kevir, but he found the ground as slippery as soap. When it is like this a man loses control over his movements. He tries to keep his balance, but stumbles over small inequalities, and slips down into holes, and cannot calculate his step, and tries in vain for a firm foothold. It would be still worse for camels. They would tumble down, and then refuse to get up again. No, the Kevir is not for us, was his opinion; it does not dry so