

CHAPTER XXX

THROUGH THE DESERT BY NIGHT

HARD frost on the night of January 31, as low as 22.8°. But at one o'clock the temperature was up again to 53.4°.

We knew well that to-day at least we could not make a start, for our camels had gone back to Jandak, and would not return till morning. It was therefore of no consequence whether a caravan passed Ramazan's dry well or not, though, indeed, it would make a change in our monotonous life. We were almost like shipwrecked men lying on a small island and waiting to be rescued after they had lost their ship.

Our little colony consisted of Gulam Hussein and myself, Agha Muhamed and his servant, Nevengk and an ass; so we were six in all. Our neighbours lay outside among their bales, where they made themselves a lair among the loads with mats and empty sacks. We remained in our den, but were enticed out by the fine warm weather and the light pleasant north-west breeze. My felt rug and my mat were spread out in the open; the burkha, slung over the stand, afforded shade, and I lay reading a novel as though I were on a summer holiday. Meanwhile Gulam Hussein cleared out the hole and swept out all the dust and rubbish. It was quiet and silent around us—not a sound, not a bell from the north announced that a caravan had ventured to defy the desert and its ground, still sodden after the last rain.

Then I drew a panorama of our dreary surroundings. To the north the hill above Husseinan appeared faintly