

moisture lies longer, and even if the surface were not more dangerous there than here, the risk would, however, increase with the breadth, and the danger of being overtaken by rain be greater.

In the far north a small dark line floats on the horizon, and above this line hills rise, scarcely perceptible, and a trifle above the level. The statement that they are altogether lost sight of is therefore not true; we see them, though faintly. A place where signs of several caravan camps are seen—fragments of straw and camel dung—is called Barindas-i-ser-i-nemek, because it lies at “the beginning of the salt.” And before we are aware we are out on the salt flat, which is covered with a very thin layer of dirt and mud. But the ground is treacherous, for if the camels put their hooves through the salt crust, barely 4 inches thick, they are liable to break their legs, and if a whole sheet breaks in, they sink in the soaked clay, which, according to my men, forms a bed of mud 5 feet deep below the salt crust. This is then like an ice-sheet stretched over it. Holes and gutters lie close beside our track, and it often seems wonderful that the camels do not step into them.

It was easy to perceive that Agha Muhamed was following a definite route, and not groping his way at random. In Ser-i-nemek caravans have a landmark on the way southwards. On the salt flat longish collections of water stand in the troughs worn out by innumerable camels. Generally the hard salt belt is covered in winter by a foot of water, but this year the precipitation had been under the average. Even if the salt is under water, the caravans pass over without hindrance, the camels do not mind it in the least, and the distance amounts to only 2 farsakh. In summer the salt crust is quite dry and hard, though water lies in the mire below. Now the surface is as even as ice, but here and there stand small shallow yellow pools with white rings. In holes going right through the salt crust clear water comes up. There is not the least trace of a path; it is swept away by the precipitation every winter. But it is not difficult to find the way. Skeletons of camels, not yet fallen to pieces, act as sign-posts.