

retreat of the waters. The most important plains, however, are the deltas of the larger streams on the northern and eastern sides of the "hamun." Most of these lie in Afghanistan and are almost unknown, but the largest, that of the Helmund, is partly in Persia and has been frequently described. To the eye the delta seems to be a flat plain, merging into the reed-beds on the one hand and ending abruptly at the foot of the bluffs on the other. Toward the lake the soil is clayey like the lake bottom, and is exceedingly slippery and sticky in wet weather. Toward the head of the delta it gradually changes to very fine sand, in which there is a considerable proportion of clay. Everywhere the soil is fertile if properly irrigated. Where cultivation is carried on, the whole country is often half under water. Deep and

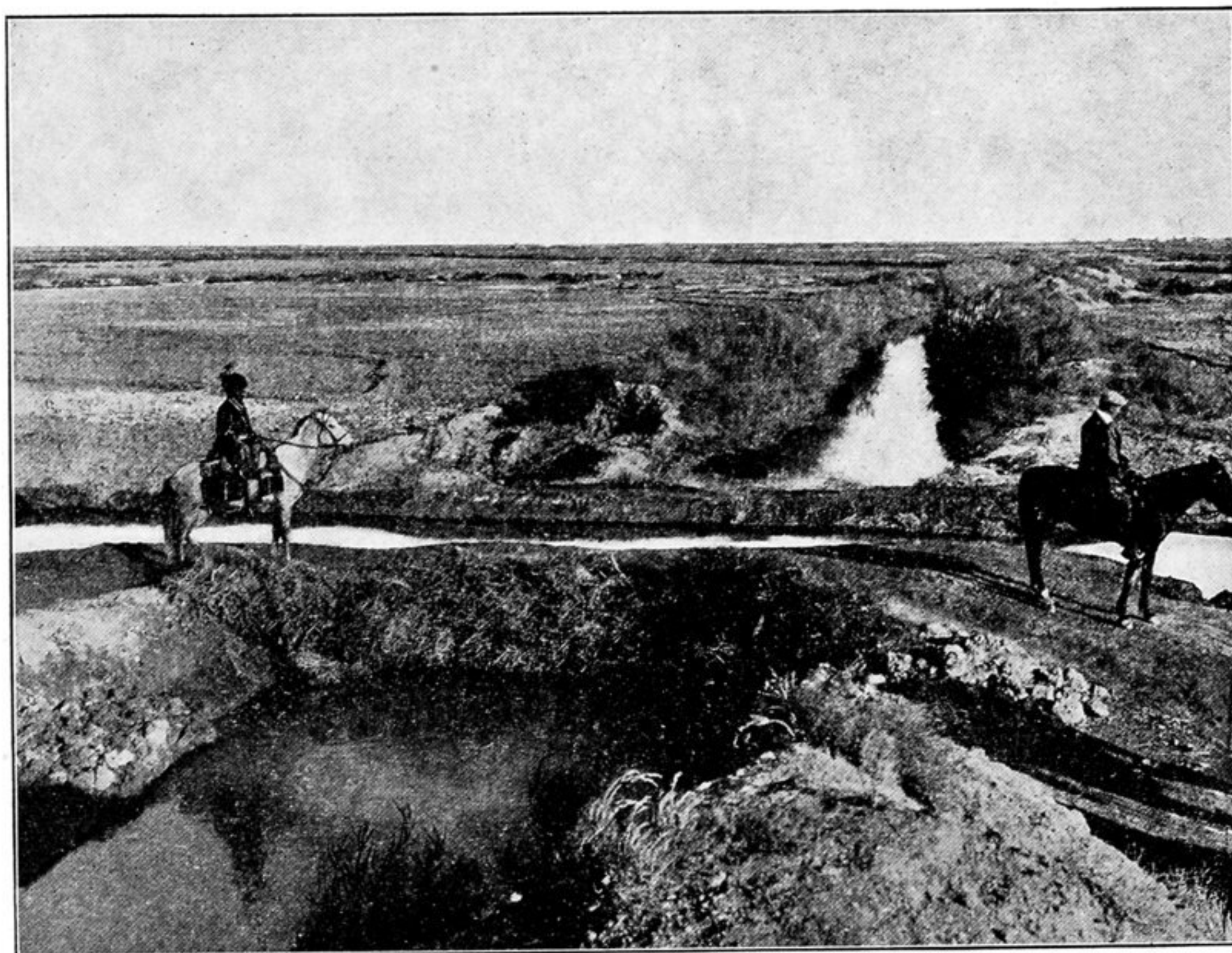


Fig. 167.—Canals in the Delta of the Helmund at Sistan. One canal crosses the other upon a bridge of weeds.

rarely bridged canals wander here and there, and even cross one another on bridges, which are nothing but dried weeds packed into the water and covered with clayey soil (fig. 167). Grain and melons grow luxuriantly, but other crops are rare and fruit can not be raised because of the wind. At present large tracts are not under cultivation and are covered with a spiny growth of camel thorn bearing purple-pink flowers, or with a dense growth of tall tamarisks forming an almost impenetrable jungle 20 feet high, the home of innumerable wild boars and jackals. In still other places, as at Zahidan, the delta is being invaded and buried by sand. At first sight there appears to be no special reason why certain areas should be cultivated, others should be left to camel thorn, still others should be covered with tamarisks, while the most unfortunate parts are being destroyed by sand. The explanation is