

the north-east, carefully hugs the line where the glacis of absolutely sterile Sai, sloping down from the foot of the Kunlun and overrun in parts by high dunes, is fringed northward by a zone of desert vegetation. Here the subsoil drainage of the streams lost higher up on the Sai again approaches the surface, and, besides supporting the growth of wild poplars, tamarisks, and other desert plants, provides occasional wells. Without them this desert route would be quite impossible for caravan traffic. As it is, the water of these wells is throughout brackish, and at some points so salt as to be scarcely fit for drinking. This, coupled with the great summer heat, the mosquitoes then bred in the flood-beds, and the risks arising from Burans, practically closes the route from May till September.

But wherever the amount of subsoil water is larger, owing to the size of the rivers which debouch from the mountains on to the glacis of Piedmont gravel, the belt of sandy scrub and jungle spreads out. Thus for two long marches beyond the Endere River, to the stages of Shudan-öghil and Chingelik, we passed through large areas of relatively abundant desert vegetation. They were said to extend considerably northward and to afford winter grazing for some of the flocks belonging to the Endere Tarim. Moving along these dreary pastures I thought of what Marco Polo tells us in his brief account of the 'Province of Charchan': "The whole of the Province is sandy . . . and much of the water that you find is bitter and bad. However, at some places you do find fresh and sweet water. When an army passes through the land, the people escape with their wives, children, and cattle a distance of two or three days' journey into the sandy waste; and knowing the spots where water is to be had, they are able to live there, and to keep their cattle alive, whilst it is impossible to discover them; for the wind immediately blows the sand over their track."

After we had on the third day left behind the numerous and steeply cut summer flood-beds of the Kara-muran River, the stretches of absolutely bare desert crossed by the route steadily extended, while what vegetation could be found between grew thinner and thinner. A cutting