

wind from the north-east faced us for the latter half of the journey, and with the dust haze and cold much increased its discomforts. When after toiling over heavy dunes we arrived on the evening of the fourth day at the stage appropriately known as Yantak-kuduk, 'the Well of Thorns,' I was cheered to find a gourd of milk and a basket of eggs hospitably deposited. It was a mute greeting thoughtfully sent ahead by the Beg of Charchan. Nowhere else on this 'high road' did we come in touch with humanity. The ground onwards now changed to a barren gravel Sai overrun at intervals by low dunes of coarse sand. Only a few depressed patches held vegetation of the scantiest sort, and at one of these, called Kalasti, from a robber's skull once exposed there as a warning—or an assurance—to wayfarers, we made our last halt before Charchan.

Next morning I had scarcely covered five miles when a big cavalcade met us to offer welcome. It was Sidik Beg of Charchan, with a posse of local notables, and four sturdy Pathan traders who were temporarily settled at the oasis, and eagerly asserted their right to share in the reception of a 'Sahib' from their own land. I was doubly pleased with the presence of these enterprising pioneers of Indian trade, when I found that all had their homes in such familiar trans-border tracts as Swat, Buner, and Bajor. They were accustomed to take small caravans with Indian goods from Khotan *via* Charklik to Karashahr and on to Turfan in the north-east, and had found Charchan a convenient half-way station on their ventures. They had much needed information to give about routes, distances, supplies, and the like.

But there was little chance for quenching my thirst for such practical knowledge, until a big Dastarkhan, brought up by the Beg's people, including meat dishes and dried fruits, had been duly disposed of by the joint efforts of my hosts and my own men who had long missed such rich fare (Fig. 107). I had plenty of time to gather local information as we rode on, for the whole march to the oasis lay over an absolutely bare level plain with not one feature to distract attention. At last, when the dark patch