

CHAPTER XXVIII

ALONG THE CHARCHAN RIVER

CHARCHAN fulfilled whatever promises my first impressions of the place had held out. The two days' halt, which was all I could afford, proved a pleasant and refreshing change from the last five weeks' desert journeyings for both men and animals. There was plenty of dry lucerne for the ponies to revel in after all the hard fare on reeds and thorny scrub. The camels, too, found a treat after their own fashion on the foliage of the Jigda trees, withered as it was by the frosts. The men had the means provided to get ready all sorts of supplementary winter clothing, and, what they probably enjoyed quite as much, could indulge in a court full of gossiping idlers and a lively Bazar within easy reach.

Already on the march I had gathered information which showed that Charchan was now a steadily growing oasis. The time when it was a dreaded place of exile, used by the Chinese in pre-rebellion days as a settlement for malefactors from Khotan, had passed away long ago. From a wretched collection of hovels, such as it was described some thirty years earlier, it had gradually developed into a lively oasis now manifestly bigger than Niya. It is difficult throughout Turkestan to obtain approximately correct statistics of population, etc. But in oases of such recent growth as Charchan even the help of conventional figures derived from earlier settlements fails one. So much, however, seemed clear, that the number of households among the settled cultivators could not well be less than five hundred.

Arable land there was, of course, as much as the most