

The caravan route towards Lop-nor on which I was now eager to push forward, leads for the greatest part along the banks of the Charchan Darya. The facility thus afforded for the supply of water, grazing, and fuel must at all times have been appreciated by travellers bound east of Charchan. Yet with the exception of Tattran, a small hamlet some twenty-four miles lower down, there is no inhabited place along the hundred and fifty odd miles of jungle and desert which have to be crossed before Vash-shahri is reached, the westernmost settlement in the Charklik or Lop-nor district. We had accordingly to carry seven days' supplies for both men and ponies.

For the first two days the route on the right bank, which is now more in favour than the one shown in previous maps, closely hugs the actual river-bed. Under a misty grey sky the succession of tamarisk cones, reed-covered steppe, and thin Toghrak jungle offered little to the eyes to relieve a sense of monotony. I had secured at Charchan an excellent guide in the person of Ismail, a cultivator of Tattran, whose reputation as a hunter was great. Whatever feats he might have achieved with his quaint old matchlock, there soon remained in my mind no doubt as to his keen sight and astonishingly accurate sense of locality. The unfailing ease and correctness with which he found our bearings over ground offering so few landmarks, made my work on the plane-table quite a pleasure in spite of the benumbing cold to which it exposed my fingers.

That Ismail 'Pawan' had also the pluck befitting a hunter, I learned when on the morning of the third march I proceeded to visit the small brick mound known as 'Tim' which I had found marked in Hedin's map. It lay on the opposite side of the river, and when I proposed to cross over Ismail had his doubts on the subject. The bottom of the river-bed is formed in many places by treacherous oozy mud which would not bear ponies, and might prove dangerous for men on foot. The difficulty was increased by the young ice floes which now came floating down the river in daily increasing size.

When we reached the shepherd-station of Shor-köl-