

even the reed beds were dying, before we regained the line of spring-fed marshes and the camels' track leading past their southern edge. The air was perfectly calm and clear, and the brilliant colours thrown by the setting sun upon the snowy range southward, rising like a huge rampart with peaks over 18,000 feet high, only helped to deepen by contrast the mournful gloom of the foreground.

On the following day a wearisome march protracted until late at night brought us back to the actual river-bed. But owing to its very sinuous course it was impossible to keep by it, and our track led again and again along deserted dry channels and across extensive stretches of salt-encrusted steppe which, like much of the ground on the preceding marches, tried the camels' feet sorely. Several of them had developed bad cracks on their soles and delayed still more our heavily laden baggage train. At Ak-ilak where we camped under a splendid Toghrak grove, it was midnight before dinner appeared.

The experience was repeated next day when we first followed the river down to the grazing ground known as Lashkar-satma from a small guard once stationed here in Yakub Beg's days, and then struck across a belt of high and completely sterile dunes to the south-east. The big semi-lunes of drift sand rose up to about 120 feet, and all pointed with their concave face to the south-west, the first intimation of that prevailing north-east wind with the frequency and force of which in the whole Lop-nor region we were soon to become familiar. At Yaka-toghrak darkness obliged us to halt by the edge of some desert jungle which subsoil drainage from the mountains keeps alive. There was fuel in plenty to protect us from the bitter cold of the night; but the water from a shallow well proved quite undrinkable, thus giving foretaste of one of the chief amenities awaiting us round Lop-nor.