

CHAPTER XXX

START FOR THE LOP DESERT

ON the morning of December 6th, 1906, I set out from Charklik. I was up long before daybreak, but it took four hours' constant urging to tear my big caravan from its flesh-pots. In its full strength it was not likely to see such again for a long time. For two miles we passed between well-tilled fields, and then reached a somewhat narrower belt of arable land known as Tattran, where cultivation was said to be carried on intermittently every third year. Low tamarisk growth was allowed to encroach on these fields, for the regular cultivation of which either the available water or labour did not suffice. By the side of a shallow, ice-covered river branch which divides the two areas, I found all my fifty labourers duly arrayed, each couple sharing a sturdy donkey well laden with bags of flour and heavy furs for the men and their modest utensils. I made sure that a week's supply of oats had also been brought for every animal, and that the artisans I had taken care to have included among the labourers (two carpenters, a blacksmith 'Ustad,' and a leather-worker) were duly provided with implements. The whole seemed a workmanlike lot and resigned to the hardships before them.

As I reviewed my crew the strong Mongolian strain in most of the faces struck me greatly. Then, as we passed beyond the last fields on to the bare Sai of coarse gravel, the relatives of the men and the Begs who had come so far bade us farewell with shouts of 'Yol bolsun,' 'May there be a road.' Rarely had this Turki good-bye sounded to me so pregnant in meaning. Our march of close on twenty miles led all day eastwards over the monotonous