

Begs masquerading in official Chinese get-up. It is true that Kum-chapkan, the other hamlet boasting of a Beg, was only a short distance lower down the river. But after my experience at Vash-shahri I had grown accustomed to seeing the official zeal for colonization in this region taking a turn at Potemkin fictions. In any case there was evidence that, what with their profits from fishing and grazing, these good Lopliks could afford to make a brave show.

In order to assure a timely start on the morrow I had taken care to get a ferry constructed well ahead under Mullah's supervision, and to start off our camels long before daybreak from Miran. So on reaching Abdal I had the satisfaction of seeing that the five dug-outs cleverly lashed together for a ferry and propelled by skilful Loplik paddles had already succeeded in taking a portion of our transport and supply column across the Tarim. It flowed here in a deep and well-defined bed, about fifty yards broad, with a current of a little under six feet per second. But more impressive than the river's appearance was the thought that here in this narrow bed there flowed past me all that remained of the united drainage which the great snow-covered ranges of the Kun-lun, the Pamirs and T'ien-shan send down into this huge thirsty basin of Turkestan.

On the right bank I established my depot of whatever baggage could be spared in a felt tent or Ak-oi well removed from the inflammable-looking reed huts. Tila Bai, the steadiest and most reliable of my servants, who was to remain behind and keep guard over my boxes, knew that they contained all my reserve of uncoined silver intended for Tun-huang, besides the most precious of my 'finds' since Khotan. His care was to extend, too, to our ponies, which were to return to Abdal after taking us to the first waterless stage on the journey.

It was far harder for me to leave behind at Abdal my devoted helpmate Chiang-ssü-yeh. But eager as he was to face the 'Ta-Gobi,' 'the Great Desert,' with me, I knew well that his feet, unaccustomed to more than short town walks, would be unequal to the long, trying tramps before us across dunes and eroded ground. To spare a camel for him was impossible, and even if, as he pleaded, I could