

"the camels' tea," so my camel factotum declared, in the cold of the winter, and doubly needed when they were to go so long without any grazing. Ever since we started from Charklik Hassan Akhun had shown that he felt being put on his mettle. It would have been too much to expect him to divest himself of his quarrelsome temper and inordinately sharp tongue. But placed in charge of this armada of 'ships of the desert,' he seemed to realize his responsibility and the importance of proving that much-vaunted experience of the desert which he claimed from my Taklamakan expeditions. In any case I felt the instinctive assurance that Hassan Akhun's was the only human soul with me for whom this desert adventure had a real attraction.

Our march on December 12th was long but uneventful. We were following a rough track, evidently frequented by Loplik fishermen. It led north-eastwards through dreary salt-encrusted steppe with scanty tamarisk, mostly dead, or else beside shallow depressions where open sheets of salty water still unfrozen were edged by abundant reed beds. Dusk obliged us to halt near the lagoon known as Yaghizmak-köl, then completely dried up. I was anxious to cover as much ground as possible during the first marches while our camels were still fresh, and was up by 4.30 A.M. next morning. But as the ponies had now to be sent back owing to want of water, those of my men who had hitherto been mounted did not quite relish the prospect of having, in common with myself, to trudge it now on foot. So by one pretext or another they tried to put off that experience as long as possible, and succeeded for once in delaying the start.

In order somewhat to lighten the loads, two of my own men were to be deposited with a portion of the labourers' rations at a kind of advance base a short distance farther on where the hunters expected to find some ice. When I declared my choice of the men, and Muhammadju, my staid Yarkandi servant, found that he was not included, his disappointment was so great that he threw himself on the ground in impotent rage and writhed like a madman. It was a very effective performance, but