

CHAPTER XXXVII

BY THE TARIM AND CHARCHAN DARYA

It was a strange sensation to have dropped so suddenly upon water in abundance and upon traces of human habitation. The latter, however, was manifestly intermittent; for neither our united shouts nor a shot fired from a carbine succeeded in drawing any sign of life from the hut visible in the distance. It was of importance to make sure of our exact position; and as the chance of catching a guide was greater if we approached the main bed of the Tarim and the route leading along it, we decided to move straight across to the west. The sheet of perfectly transparent ice before us looked most inviting in its smoothness. Before taking to it I had the camels' loads lightened by emptying the last two bagfuls of ice which remained, though after nearly a month's strict economy it seemed sadly wasteful to scatter fine lumps of ice on the sand of the lake shore.

Marching westwards for about a mile and a half we crossed successive arms of the lake, all covered with ice so clear that we could see right down to the bottom, six to eight feet deep, and watch the fishes moving. Its thickness was about one foot, as measured at occasional holes which fishermen had cut to insert their nets. According to Tokhta Akhun's account, it was customary for the fishermen to form a ring on the ice and to drive the fish into the net by stamping in a gradually narrowing circle. It was curious to watch the effect which the novel experience of crossing this ice-sheet had on honest Naik Ram Singh. None of the strange sights he had shared in our travels through mountains and deserts had so far made anything