

now rapidly running out, obliged me to keep as far as possible to the route which connects the several fishing stations along the main bed of the Tarim, and is utilized also in parts for the Chinese postal service from Charklik towards Tikkenlik and Korla. Seeing that the route is well known, I can be brief in my account of these marches.

We had just recrossed the wide marshy depression of the Ilek, and were moving across the interfluvial belt of sandy jungle to the south-west, when to my pleasant surprise we were met by the ponies which I had ordered Mullah to send up from Abdal in charge of Aziz and Musa. So progress became suddenly easy, for us mounted men at least, and I confess that the comfort of being in the saddle once more helped me greatly to appreciate the pleasant change the scenery underwent as we neared the Tarim. With rows of living Toghraks becoming more and more frequent, the ground we passed through assumed quite a park-like appearance. Once by the bank of the hard-frozen river we had a magnificent natural avenue of wild poplars to ride along. It was like a vision of those distant ages when the lines of fallen dead Toghraks we had passed in the desert still rose high by river beds long since dry. We halted at Tokum, where my followers found shelter against another bitterly cold night in a picturesque cluster of reed huts, ensconced in a thicket of poplars and occupied by five or six Loplik families. I could buy the men flour and a sheep for a big treat, and myself indulge again in the long-missed luxury of milk.

Next day we moved down to the fishing-station of Shirghe-chapkan; passing the Kötetiklik-köl again, and a succession of smaller lagoons all connected at flood time by the channel of the Ilek, now dry. The ice was delightfully smooth everywhere, and I longed for skates to warm myself by a good run against the cruel north-east wind which blew all day. The Niaz-köl, which the six or seven reed huts of Shirghe-chapkan adjoin, forms the last widening of the Ilek bed, and a few miles lower down, the latter unites with the present main course of the Tarim.