

confined quarters in Kuchar city which the hospitality of Sabat Ali Khan, the kindly old Ak-sakal of the local Afghan traders, had pressed upon me look doubly gloomy. So I was glad when by the morning of January 25th the great division of my caravan was completed. After blocking traffic in the narrow street for hours, the heavy goods train of antiques on twenty-four camels was started on its long journey to Khotan in charge of Chiang-sü-yeh and Tila Bai, the most reliable of my Muhammadans. My own caravan, including the party of Rai Lal Singh who had rejoined me at Kuchar, seemed quite handy and light in comparison. Our own seven brave camels would have amply sufficed for our much-reduced baggage. But I knew what heavy loads of supplies, fodder, and water (*recte*, ice) would have to be added before the desert march was begun, and wondered whether by adding only eight hired animals I was not cutting the margin too fine.

Through a grey misty afternoon, with slush on the road and past snow-covered avenues of trees, we made the short march to Char-shamba, near the edge of the Kuchar oasis. On the next day a long ride over scrub-covered ground which bore quite a homely European look, thanks to a light fall of snow, brought us to Shahyar. The surroundings of this small town, recently made the headquarters of a separate little district, looked bleak, nor did its crowded but dingy streets dispel this impression. But the attentive magistrate, Chang Ta-jên, the same whom in 1906 I had missed at Tash-kurghan, had provided a very hospitable welcome. Begs and other local dignitaries rode out to meet me, and everything for our onward journey was reported in readiness.

But after I had settled down for the night under the modest shelter of a trader's house at a safe distance from the noisy Bazar, it did not take me long to ascertain that the report about available guides was wrong. None of the Shahyar hunters brought to me while I waited for the arrival of the camels floundering in the soft snow, had ever seen the route I was anxious to follow across the desert. What these alleged 'guides' knew only was the