

promised to exempt their families from all corvées for the year. Chang Ta-jên spoke Russian quite well—he had learned the language during a long stay at Mukden—and could make out with ease my intended route from the Russian map of Turkestan I showed him. Perhaps it was as well that he could form no adequate idea of its difficulties.

In spite of all my efforts and those of my energetic factotum Ibrahim Beg, the multifarious preparations were not completed until late at night. But the morning after that busy day's halt saw the fully equipped caravan started. The fifteen camels we took with us were by no means too many, considering that six weeks' food supplies had to be carried for a party counting altogether twenty men, and that at least eight animals would be needed for the carriage of ice to provide a reserve of drinking water. Once in the desert everybody had to walk, though I had rather rashly agreed to take four ponies along in order to assure greater mobility for my Indian assistants and myself after we should have reached the Keriya River.

Our route lay first in the tract of Chimen, where for nearly thirteen miles we passed through patches of cultivation alternating with scrubby steppe of equally fertile soil, but left untilled owing to want of water. Abandoned fields and canals corroborated the local statements that irrigation had become increasingly difficult over this area during the last ten or fifteen years. The people of Chimen assured me that the increase of 'new land' in the south-western part of the Kuchar oasis, with the consequent greater demand for canal water, was the chief cause why the river flowing from that side towards Shahyar now failed to fill their old irrigation cuts. It was curious to learn how the Chimen farmers had fought these adverse conditions, partly by shifting their fields to areas which the canals can feed even at a lower level, and partly by converting arable ground into pasture. As we approached the riverine belt of the Tarim, fenced sheep-runs, which I had seen nowhere else in Turkestan, became frequent.

Then behind a narrow line of dunes we struck the big bed of the Tarim. The river, hard frozen, now filled two channels 300 and 120 yards across; but the total width of