

The pools, fully twenty-five feet or so below the level of the surrounding ground, did not look very inviting, with shores of black hard-trodden mud and a tangled mass of decayed reeds. But the water in a rough well constructed by their side proved quite fresh, and the supply of ice was abundant. Flood-water did not appear to have reached this point for long years; yet the water left behind in this deepest part of the ravine had not dried up or turned salt. The explanation, no doubt, lay in the pools being fed periodically by underground drainage.

The cutting of ice went on all through the night and early morning, and it was not till 10 A.M. that we could set out with eight huge bags duly filled and loaded on as many camels. All the camels received here their last watering, six to eight bucketfuls making up the regulation 'drink' in winter before a long journey through waterless ground. Tokhta's rôle as guide had come to an end; for we now shaped our course by the compass due south until we should strike the Keriya River delta. After about six miles we emerged from the last strip of forest upon an old river bed, narrow and winding, known as Achchik Darya. It held no ice where we passed it, only luxuriant beds of Kumush. From old Khalil, who caught us up in the morning, and who insisted upon accompanying us so far, I learned that until about ten years before the bed had been filled by flood-water from the Tarim. Now it no longer reached it, and the flourishing lines of wild poplars were likely to turn before many years into dead forest or 'kötek.'

A short halt enabled Khalil to give us his last farewell and blessing. He gave it with more ceremony than I should have expected for the occasion, turning towards Mecca in a long prayer, and the men all joining loudly in the 'Aman.' From Khotan to Lop-nor I had made more than one start into desert quite as forbidding, without ever witnessing such a display of emotion. But along the Tarim even reputed hunters are rather tame people, unaccustomed to the wilds, and the Shahyar men showed plainly how afraid they were of the venture. I could not instil into their timid souls that adventurous curiosity which had so