

behind this day—the high Dawan to our right was climbed. The view from the top in the evening light was depressing. To east, west, and south alike there extended with bewildering uniformity vast stretches of dead forest, tamarisk cones, and intervening ridges of sterile sand.

It was clear that we were now in the ancient dried-up delta, which had once seen the death-struggle of the Keriya River. But which of the many dry beds that lay hidden in this strangely oppressive wilderness of dead jungle was the one leading to the actual river end? My secret apprehension that our real trouble would begin on reaching this dead delta was about to be fully verified. It was as if, after navigating an open sea, we had reached the treacherous marsh-coast of a tropical delta without any lighthouses or landmarks to guide us into the right channel. With these doubts weighing heavily on my mind I descended south-westwards in the hope of again striking the bed we had followed during the morning. But growing darkness obliged us to halt before we could locate it.

The following morning opened more hopefully after a night of worrying doubts. When day broke it was found that the depression where we had camped formed part of the old river bed we had tried to regain, and which we decided to follow southward. For about three miles we succeeded, as its course, though buried in places under heavy sand, could generally be made out by the rows of dead Toghraks lining the banks (Fig. 283). But farther on all trace of it vanished in a maze of dunes and dead forest. The landscape was singularly flat and open. But as far as the eye would carry there extended the same desolate grey screen of dead jungle. To the south it seemed thicker than behind us; but this difference soon proved an optical illusion, due to the shadows cast northward by the shrivelled trees and bushes. Only to the west far away there showed ridges of bare sand; their bright yellow was almost a relief to the eye wearied by the dismal greyish brown of the dead scrub.

With nothing to guide us in this never-ending delta I was particularly anxious to make sure at least of our latitude. A mid-day observation was the simplest process