

curious was the finding of a worked flint on a patch of bare clay. It was a clear proof that this desolate region had known human beings at least in the Stone Age. The river vanished after some four miles under smothering dunes; but passing through dead forest and low tamarisk cones due south we found ourselves suddenly back again on its bank. As we followed it farther living poplars increased in such number by its banks that even the low-spirited Shahyar men began to believe in our nearing the real river end. The appearance of dead reeds in thick beds was greeted with elation, and one of the Shahyar men triumphantly picked up a piece of charred wood, the first proof, we thought, of man's near presence.

Yet this glimmer of confidence did not last long. When after crossing a great bend of the river through dead forest we touched it again on the east bank, the look of the bed was more desolate than ever. We had now closely approached the latitude where, according to Hedin's map, the actual river with its jungle belt ended. Yet vainly did we look out for the live reeds and scrub which our camels were needing so badly. Huge dunes rolled across the deep bed of the river, fully four hundred yards across where we halted, and the patches of clay emerging between them were perfectly dry.

The attempt to dig a well proved fruitless. The hired camels were showing signs of exhaustion. Our own were far bigger and better adapted for desert work,—were they not bred in the Keriya jungle, and probably distant kindred of the wild camels with the tracks of which we were now so familiar? Yet even they felt the pinch, and used to approach me with pathetic appeals for bread. How glad should I have been to afford them a really good treat of this cherished luxury! But a ten-pound loaf disappeared only too quickly among these seven hungrily gaping mouths, and our supply of flour and water for baking with was getting too low for such additional customers.

February 10th was a day full of anxious uncertainty. After little more than a mile on our march southward the river bed, so imposing before, became completely buried under big dunes. As we moved on all trace of living