

## CHAPTER XC

### FROM AK-SU TO YARKAND

ON April 20th I started from Mazar-tagh down the dry bed of the Khotan River for Ak-su. During the eight rapid marches which carried us north to the river's junction with the Tarim we suffered a good deal from the increasing heat of the desert and a succession of sand-storms. Such conditions made me realize with full intensity the experiences of Hedin on his first disastrous crossing of the Taklamakan in May of 1896. Kasim, who had met him afterwards during his enforced rest at the shepherd camp of Böksam, was able to show me the pool of fresh water, some twenty miles lower down on the right bank, which had proved the great traveller's saving when he struggled through from the 'sea of sand' exhausted by thirst. The constancy of these pools, found at considerable intervals along that side of the river bed where the current sets, and the delicious freshness of their water, furnish proof that there must be a steady flow of subsoil water making its way down the bed of the river, often over a mile wide, even at the driest season.

Lower down we passed for days through a network of old and new river beds where Kasim's guidance was welcome. Yet, when my thoughts went back to that terrible dried-up delta of the Keriya River, our route here, with plentiful water and grazing at the end of each hot day's march, seemed quite a luxurious line of progress. The only incident of the journey was provided by a tiger which prowled round our camp the night before we reached the Tarim, evidently on the look-out for a pony or donkey. 'Dash,' otherwise the soundest of sleepers, awakened me