

dying course of the Mīrān River over ground typically illustrating the successive stages of a terminal river course in the Lop depression. For about six miles we passed through a belt of luxuriant Toghrak jungle extending along flood channels which in places retained pools of water already hard frozen. Then the riverine tree growth gave way to a zone of tamarisk-cones and occasional reed-beds gradually thinning out. For about ten miles onwards our way lay across a bare and almost level salt-encrusted plain with scarcely a tamarisk upon it. Its appearance clearly indicated periodical inundation from the Lop-nōr marshes eastward. A stretch of actual marshy soil with scanty scrub was crossed about two miles before reaching the slightly raised ground on the right bank of the Tārīm occupied by the little hamlet of Abdal. This wretched collection of fishermen's reed-huts represented the most notable place for those Lopliks who still cling to their traditional ways of life (Fig. 91). For such scant observations as I was able to gather about them here and elsewhere on the Tārīm I may refer to my personal narrative.¹ It is striking evidence of the great change which the economic conditions of Loplik existence are now undergoing more and more rapidly, that on my visit to Abdal in 1914 I found the settlement practically abandoned through the removal to the new colony established within the cultivated area of Mīrān.

Depôt left at
Abdal.

At Abdal I left behind a depot of whatever baggage and supplies could possibly be spared, as well as Chiang Ssū-yeh, who, eager as he was to share my desert explorations, could not, like the rest of us, have faced on foot the long trying tramps before us. The river here, reduced to a single well-defined bed, only about 48 yards in width but of considerable depth, was still clear of ice. It was strange to think that this narrow channel, with a current of less than two yards per second, contained all that remained of the united drainage sent by the great snowy ranges of the K'un-lun, the Pāmīrs, and the T'ien-shan into the huge basin of the Tārīm. A ferry constructed beforehand out of five Loplik dug-outs allowed all the camels together with the much-reduced *impedimenta* to be taken across to our camp on the left bank.

Geogra-
phical ques-
tions con-
cerning
Lop-nōr.

The journey of seven days, which carried me from this last inhabited place to the 'Lou-lan Site', lay across a portion of the Lop desert which presents features of considerable geographical interest owing to their special bearing upon the much-discussed question of the ancient extent and position of Lop-nōr, to use the familiar Mongol designation for the terminal lake or marshes of the Tārīm. The journey also offered plentiful experiences of a personal nature illustrating the peculiar difficulties and hardships which must necessarily attend explorations over so extensive a desert area wholly devoid of any sort of food or even of water. The account contained in Chapters XXX and XXXI of *Desert Cathay* makes it unnecessary to repeat here a detailed description of these experiences and of the efforts which it cost to conduct my large party in safety and in good time to the chosen goal.

Lop desert
Explora-
tions of
1914-15.

Nor shall I attempt to explain and discuss here in detail the views which the topographical and other observations made on this desert crossing led me to form as to the important geographical question of the changes undergone by the Lop-nōr region during historical times. The far more extensive and prolonged explorations effected during 1914-15, in the course of my third Central-Asian journey, have produced so much more new and exact evidence that I must necessarily postpone my general review of this question until it has become possible to make the fresh materials readily accessible for reference and examination.² In the meantime, however, the

¹ Cf. *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 341 sq., 354, 428, 502. See also Joyce, *Notes on the Physical Anthropology of Chinese Turkestan and the Pamirs*, R. A. I. xlii. pp. 450 sqq., and below, Appendix C, for anthropometrical materials collected by me.

² For a brief notice of these new surveys and of the light thrown by them on the so-called 'Lop-nōr problem', cf. my *Third Journey*, *Geogr. Journal*, 1916, xlviii, pp. 121 sqq.