

SECTION III.—RELICS OF AN ANCIENT BURIAL-GROUND

During the four days we had so far spent with our base established at the Lou-lan station, the weather had favoured our labours. The temperature had indeed kept very low, with minima down to 44 degrees F. below freezing-point. But the cold, in the absence of any wind except occasional gentle breezes from the north-east, was not felt severely, and the clearness of the atmosphere had made reconnaissances easy. For most of the time the barren southern hill ranges of the Kuruk-tāgh showed their reddish-brown outlines quite clearly to the north, above the yellow expanse of Yārdangs and the grey flat of the gravel glacis. On the evening of February 12th and again on the following morning I could also make out distinctly the snowy heights of the K'un-lun far away to the south, stretching apparently from the vicinity of Bāsh-kurghān to the head-waters of the Jahān-sai.¹ This encouraged me greatly to hope that it might be possible later on, either in this or the subsequent winter, to obtain 'rays' with the theodolite to previously triangulated points in this section of the northernmost K'un-lun range and thus to secure a base for extending our triangulation from that side right across the Lop desert to the Kuruk-tāgh.

Atmo-
spheric
conditions.

Unfortunately Lāl Singh was not with us to take advantage of atmospheric conditions favourable for the measurement of angles with the theodolite. His prolonged absence from our appointed rendezvous was causing me serious anxiety. The big bonfires I caused to be lit evening after evening at the top of the ruined Stūpa in order to help him in locating our camp failed to produce any sign of his approach from the side of the Kuruk-daryā. Whether this delay was due to difficulties of transport encountered on the desert journey or to the effect of direct Chinese obstruction, the uncertainty as to his progress seemed seriously to threaten the execution of my further plans.

Arrival of
Lāl Singh
delayed.

This weight of doubts could not, however, be allowed to interfere with my immediate task, the exploration of the ancient remains to the north-east, revealed by Afrāz-gul's successful reconnaissance, and for these I decided to set out on February 15th. The camels, it is true, were not expected to return from their rest at Āltmish-bulak for another three days; but the lack of transport animals was not permitted to delay our move. A couple of Loplik labourers whom the preceding fatigues and hardships had brought on the sick list were left behind at our base under the care of faithful Ibrāhīm Bēg, who would also keep an eye on our ice depot. The rest of the men were taken along and just sufficed to carry the minimum of indispensable baggage and the necessary supplies of food and ice.

Start for
exploration
to NE.

Our march, which started at daybreak on a cloudy and somewhat windy morning, was made easier by the fact that its direction to the north-east was more or less parallel to the general trend of the Yārdang terraces. These for about a mile were very sharply sculptured and rose to 12 feet or more in height. Farther on their height somewhat diminished, and in the gradually widening trenches between them I noticed the appearance of coarse, almost gravel-like sand, which supplies a most effective instrument for the relentless erosive action of the winds. Like the small pieces of gypsum and fragments of chalk which soon began to be frequent, it had been obviously carried here from ground farther away to the north-east. Small pieces of pottery were plentiful for a distance of about two and a half miles from L.A., and small fragments of bronze and a few stone implements (L.A.—L.C. 01–9) were also picked up *en route*. Beyond an old bed marked by fallen Toghraks half a mile farther on, the Yārdang terraces were found singularly bare of remains of dead vegetation, while potsherds were still occasionally met with in small patches. Finally the pottery debris became again more abundant as after about six miles of march we approached the conspicuous terrace, L.C. (Fig. 158), where Afrāz-gul had come upon indications of ancient burials.

March to
L.C. Mesa.¹ See Map No. 30. B–D. 3.