

CHAPTER VIII

THE SEARCH FOR THE ANCIENT CHINESE HIGH ROAD

SECTION I.—TO THE EASTERNMOST OUTPOST OF LOU-LAN

THE halt of four days, from the 21st to the 24th of February, at Āltmish-bulak, after the fatigues and privations already undergone by men and beasts in the desert, was a much-needed and very helpful preparation for the difficult explorations immediately before us. The abundant grazing on the reed-beds of the little oasis, uninviting as it might have appeared in its wintry dryness, was a great boon for the camels, which had felt the prolonged want of food even more than the lack of water. On their powers of endurance, I knew, we should have mainly to depend, if we were to extend our surveys in the waterless desert sufficiently far to complete the tasks I had in view, with a reasonable margin of safety for us all. The camels were happily grazing and our men free to attend to much-needed repairs, adjustment of saddles and loads, &c.; while Lāl Singh was occupied with the record of his previous mapping preliminary for fresh surveys, &c., and I myself was busy with arrears of writing work and the careful preparation of our future plans.

Halt at
Āltmish-
bulak.

There was nothing to distract my attention from these tasks in the surroundings offered by Āltmish-bulak, delightful as this small patch of vegetation seemed to us men, too, after the dead world we had toiled in. The little oasis, only about a mile and a half across where widest, is situated near the point where an utterly barren valley debouches from the southernmost Kuruk-tāgh range, and lies on the most direct route between the ancient sites of Lou-lan and the Turfān basin. Though it may therefore have seen occasional traffic when those sites were occupied, yet no vestige of antiquity could be traced. Nor did the physical features, either of the small area where a fine sandy soil supports desert vegetation, or of the adjoining waste of decomposed rocky ridges, gravel, or stony 'Sai', offer special interest. They had moreover been fully described already by Dr. Hedin.¹

Position of
Āltmish-
bulak.

The atmosphere, with its dust haze raised by light north-easterly winds, betokened the approach of spring, though a minimum temperature of 21 degrees Fahr. below freezing-point was still registered during our stay. This, of course, precluded any chance of our obtaining a sight of the K'un-lun range to the south of the desert, and so securing a connecting link for the triangulation of the Kuruk-tāgh that I planned to carry out during the following winter. But on the last day of our stay, February 24th, the air cleared sufficiently to allow a view of a considerable portion of the utterly barren range to the north and north-east. Taking advantage of this chance for plane-table work, Lāl Singh climbed a hill due north, which subsequently served as a triangulation station and is marked with the height 3,960 (actually 4,247) feet on the map.² The view thence northward extended to the next much-broken hill range from which the drainage bed of Āltmish-bulak descends, and gave him a first glimpse of that region of much-decayed barren chains, with wide waterless valleys between them, in which so much of his work during the next winter was to lie.

Range
north of
Āltmish-
bulak.

On the same day our practical preparations were completed: our ice supply was replenished

¹ See Hedin, *Central Asia*, II. pp. 74 sq., 222 sq.

² For the correction of about 287 feet to be applied to

all triangulated heights of the Kuruk-tāgh in Maps Nos. 25, 29, cf. Major Mason's note in *Memoir on Maps*, p. 112.