

On tracking them with him I found an inscribed *Wu-chu* coin of the large type firmly adhering to the soil within eight yards of the foot of the hillock. There could be no further doubt now that our first march east of the dried-up sea-bed had brought us back again to ground once traversed by the ancient Han route.

Before proceeding to review the early Chinese notices referring to the salt wastes we had crossed, I may conveniently dispose here of that incident, the discovery of those footprints which so suddenly and so strangely seemed to bring us back to the world of the living. They puzzled me at first greatly, more even than my companions; for I knew from our approximate position on the plane-table that between forty and fifty miles still separated us in a straight line from Achchik-bulak, the nearest point on the caravan track to Tun-huang (Map No. 32. c. 4), and that a considerable portion of this distance necessarily lay across the great eastern bay of the sea-bed which that track skirts. The presence of this forbidding barrier excluded all thought of travellers after losing the track having erred away so far northward. It was equally impossible to assume that the footprints went back far in time; for though effaced in certain places particularly exposed to the wind, they were in general too sharply marked. The man who had made them, after ascending the hillock evidently for a look-out, had come down again. Tokhta-Ākhūn tracing his steps with the experienced eye of the hunter, soon discovered that they led back to the track of two more men accompanied by a pony and a donkey. The mysterious little party had come from the south and been apparently steering northward.

Discovery
of strange
footprints.

It was getting too late for us to follow their track farther before pitching camp on the level clay plain two miles and a quarter beyond the hillock where we had first discovered the footprints. But while the men, by the side of the scanty fire which served to melt ice for their tea, were discussing the riddle set by the strange presence of men in this lifeless wilderness, a clue to its solution was found. Maḥmūd, the young camelman, who had accompanied Lāl Singh on his journey in December to Nan-hu and returned with him by the caravan track leading from the end of the Tun-huang Limes to Mīrān, remembered having heard from Tungans grazing near our old camp C. 155 of 1907 that some time before, probably in November, a Chinese trader, after losing *en route* practically the whole of his transport, hired donkeys from Khotan, had been robbed of three 'horseshoes' (*yambu*) in silver and a valuable pony by the three Khotanese who had contracted to take him and his goods to Tun-huang. The rogues were said to have decamped with the pony and the last surviving donkey. The Chinaman, whom they had abandoned to his fate on the desert route, managed somehow to make his way to where the Tungans picked him up in a state approaching collapse. Subsequently, towards the close of December, Lāl Singh had found confirmation of the story when he came upon the abandoned loads and fifteen dead donkeys at the brackish springs of Yulghun-bulak, about seven miles to the east of Achchik-bulak.¹¹

Report of
caravan
robbed.

It thus became clear that the footprints we had chanced upon were those of the faithless donkeymen. Knowing that their robbery was bound to be discovered by any caravan moving along the desert route and that their appearance at Charkhlik would likewise be noted and excite suspicion, which would lead earlier or later to their being caught by the Chinese authorities, they had evidently tried to escape with their ill-gotten 'treasure' northward and thus to reach Turfān. Even had ice already formed at the time at the brackish springs of Yulghun-bulak—Lāl Singh had found none yet when passing weeks later—they could only have carried a very limited supply of that or of water, besides food, fodder and belongings. At the point where we found their footprints their animals must have already for three days gone without water. Even with the guidance

Attempted
escape of
rogues.

¹¹ The springs are marked in Map No. 32. D. 4, but not the name *Yulghun-bulak*. I did not hear of this on my own passage in 1907.