

## CHAPTER XII

### THE UNEXPLORED SALT DESERT OF LOP

SIX hundred years ago, Marco Polo found one of the worst parts of his great journey from Italy to China in the desert of Lop east of Charklik. For thirty days, so he tells us, he traveled northeastward, over sandy plains and sterile mountains, through a desert inhabited only by evil spirits, which were said to lure travelers to destruction with extraordinary illusions. If, during the day, the Venetian says, any one should remain behind till the caravan had passed out of sight over a sand-hill, he would unexpectedly hear himself called by name in a familiar voice. Thinking the call to come from friends, he would follow it away from the road, and soon be left to perish of thirst. In the night, which, especially in warm weather, is the best time for journeying, travelers might hear the march of a huge cavalcade close at hand. Believing it to be their own party, they would follow it, only, at daybreak, to find themselves lost in the desert. Sometimes the spirits were said to assume the appearance of a body of armed men, who filled the air with the sound of musical instruments, drums, and the clash of arms, frightening the timid travelers so that they fled helter-skelter into the desert, to lose themselves and die of hunger and thirst.

The Chinese, also, tell wonderful tales of the desert of Lop. They speak especially of a part consisting of boundless muck, which swallows up man and beast. And the Lopliks, or people of Lop, who live at the western end, tell sterner