

the Kuruk-darya reached here an ancient terminal oasis up to the beginning of the fourth century A.D. Through this once habitable ground, and across the difficult salt-encrusted expanse of the dried-up sea beyond it (Fig. 8), there had passed the earliest Chinese route leading from the Su-lo-ho trough into the Tarim basin. In a later chapter I shall describe the truly forbidding aspect of this now utterly lifeless ground, and shall give some account of the difficult explorations by which I was able to track the vestiges of the ancient route across this formidable desert.

This ancient Chinese route crossed the salt-encrusted seabed east of Lou-lan and then turned up a valley-like depression to the north-east. This takes us across a dry lake-bed surrounded by a maze of fantastically eroded clay terraces to the lowest portion of the basin of the Su-lo-ho, which contains this river's delta and its present terminal marshes.

Uninhabited except for the oasis of Tun-huang and a few minor oases, the Su-lo-ho basin need not detain us long; for notwithstanding its extent of some 220 miles from east to west, its natural features are remarkably uniform, as was its rôle throughout history. It derives its importance from the fact that, flanked by high mountains in the south and desert wastes in the north, it forms a natural 'corridor' leading from north-western China into Central Asia. In a subsequent chapter I shall describe how I discovered and explored the ruins of the ancient Chinese *Limes* or fortified border-line intended to protect this corridor.

Beyond the Su-lo-ho basin at the famous Chia-yü-kuan gate of the mediaeval 'Great Wall' of China we reach the easternmost of the undrained areas with which we are concerned. It extends from the headwaters of the Kan-chou