

indicated had a special importance as furnishing me with a safe starting-point and some guidance for the difficult task still before me, that of tracing the ancient Chinese route through the forbidding desert eastwards. But it was impossible to set out at once. Incessant toil in the waterless desert with constant exposure to its icy winds had exhausted our Loplik labourers, hardy plants as they were. When the last digging at the outlying ruins to the north-east had been done, I had to take them back to our Lou-lan base camp whence they could return in safety to the world of the living.

There at the ruined station I was to my great relief rejoined by my valiant old travel companion, Rai Bahadur Lal Singh, whom I had sent from Miran to make a survey along the dying Tarim to the Konche-darya and then down the bed of the 'Dry River' to Lou-lan. With him arrived also that plucky hunter, 'Abdurrahim, from the Kuruktagh, who with his lifelong desert experience and his magnificent camels brought fresh strength to our party. It may serve to illustrate the stamina of his animals that the baby camel to which one of them gave birth at the Lou-lan site subsequently traversed with us all those waterless wastes of salt and gravel unharmed and after the first few days on its own legs.

The topographical indications I had deduced from the position of the remains discovered in succession seemed to point to the ancient route having lain to the north-east. Yet this bearing would lead us at right angles away from the line on which, as our preceding mapping showed, we should have to look for the direct route to the eastern starting-point of the route beyond the termination of the ancient Chinese border wall. It was an observation distinctly discouraging