

for the search we should have to make for the ancient route; for the ground ahead was sure to prove devoid of all resources for human life, including water.

Careful preparation was essential for ensuring safety on such a journey through an absolute wilderness. Its estimated length of at least ten days' march was bound to put to a severe test the endurance of our brave camels, already hard tried by the work of the preceding weeks. So it became necessary at this stage first to take my party northward to the distant salt springs of Altmish-bulak at the foot of the Kuruk-tagh. The three days' march led to the discovery of interesting remains at small Chinese burial-grounds on the gravel glacia overlooking the ancient riverine belt. Then a few days' halt at Altmish-bulak had to be allowed for our camels to gather fresh strength by grazing at reed-beds and by the chance of a drink after three weeks. To us humans, too, this little patch of vegetation seemed delightful.

After replenishing our ice supply and taking a carefully arranged store of fuel, we started on February 24 for our respective tasks. The one allotted to Lal Singh was to survey the unknown north-east shores of the great salt-encrusted basin representing the dried-up ancient Lop sea-bed. I myself, accompanied by Afrazgul, proposed to search for the ancient Chinese route where it left the edge of the once inhabited Lou-lan area and to trace it over whatever ground it might have crossed in the direction of Tun-huang. It was a fascinating task, combining geographical and historical interest, but one attended also by serious difficulties and risks.

From what I knew of the general character of the ground before us it was certain that we could not hope for water,