

nor over most of it for fuel to melt our ice with, before striking the caravan track leading from Charkhlik to Tunhuang. It meant some ten days' hard marching, and there was a limit to the endurance of our brave camels, already hard tried by the preceding weeks' work in absolute desert. It was impossible to foresee what physical obstacles might be met and delay us in this wilderness so devoid of all resources. There remained the problem how to hit the line of the ancient route and to track it onwards through ground which all through historical times had been more barren, perhaps, than any similarly large area of this globe. For a careful search of any relics left behind by the ancient traffic there would be no time. Much if not most of the object in view had to be left to good fortune, together with what hints I could deduce from previous observations. Fortune served me better than I had ventured to hope.

Physical difficulties soon presented themselves as we made our way south by two trying marches, across a perfect maze of steep clay terraces and hillocks encrusted with hard salt, and by February 25 reached the vicinity of that outlying little fort. There I was fortunate enough to discover more remains which confirmed my conjectural conclusion that the initial bearing of the route lay to the north-east. At the very edge of the area with signs of dead vegetation I came upon a towering Mesa bearing on its top the remains, almost completely eroded, of an ancient watch-tower of the type familiar to me from the Chinese border wall beyond Tunhuang. We had evidently reached here the extreme eastern limit of the area to which the waters of the 'Dry River' had once carried life. Beyond this there were no ruins to guide us; for we were now passing into ground which all through