

CHAPTER XXV

LAST DAYS AT A DEAD OASIS

THE ruin (N. xxiv.) where we had discovered the small hidden archive was adjoined eastwards by three smaller dwellings half smothered by dunes. The excavation of them, which occupied us on October 25th and 26th, was not rewarded by similarly striking finds, but revealed various interesting details of domestic architecture. In one of these dwellings, buried under fully seven or eight feet of drift sand, we came upon a fine double bracket in wood which once supported the ceiling of the main room (Fig. 98). It measured nearly nine feet in length with a height of about one and a half feet, and bore on each side well-designed carvings in bold relievo. Monsters of the composite type, which Gandhara borrowed from the West and which ancient Khotan art seems particularly to have cherished, with winged bodies, crocodiles' heads, and the legs of deer, filled the end panels. The panel in the centre showed a vase holding branches with leaves and flowers pendent, the whole arranged after the fashion of an Indo-Corinthian capital. To move this massive piece of carved timber as a whole would have been quite impracticable. So I was glad that my Sapper corporal's skill permitted me to have the panels carefully separated along the bead ornaments marking the divisions. Then the weight of each portion had to be reduced by hollowing out the core in order to make up loads which a pony could carry. The sawing was effected so neatly that I felt sure that when this fine specimen of architectural carving was set up again in the British Museum it would need skilled eyes to discover the joining.