

CHAPTER XXIX

AT VASH-SHAHRI AND CHARKLIK

WITH the footsore camels painfully lagging behind and the ponies, too, showing signs of exhaustion, it was impossible to cover on November 29th the thirty odd miles which still separated us eastwards from Vash-shahri, the first little oasis of the Lop-nor region. For a considerable distance we had to surmount, too, a succession of big sand 'Dawans' which stretch inlet-like northward from the submontane belt of true desert. So I was glad when by nightfall we found a spot with some grazing and a well of tolerably fresh water, not far from the point by the roadside known as 'Pailu' where a wooden post with a Chinese inscription, protected by a tiny hut, marks the boundary between the districts of Keriya and Charklik.

The latter depends from the Tao-t'ai-ship of Ak-su, which had only some three months before passed into the charge of my old friend P'an Ta-jên. Already from Khotan in the summer I had through Chiang-ssü-yeh's elegant brush addressed a suitably worded epistle to my learned friend and patron asking official help for my explorations in his new dominions. The distance between us had been too great for an answer to reach me. But now it was a good omen and like the sign of a friend's hand stretched out from afar that here, on my very arrival within the border of P'an Ta-jên's most remote district, local assistance promptly appeared. Weary with a fresh attack of that mild malarial fever which had clung to me on and off since my tours on the Indian N.W. Frontier, I was waiting for signs of the baggage approaching, when quite unexpectedly the Beg of Vash-shahri rode up, the first man we had