

eagerly sought explorations of the winter. Ever since my plans were first formed I had fixed my eyes on the ruined sites north of Lop-nor, discovered by Hedin on his memorable journey of 1900. After exploring their remains and whatever else of ruins we might trace in this region, I proposed to take my caravan right across the great desert north-eastwards to Sha-chou or Tun-huang by the ancient route which Marco Polo followed, and which has since been abandoned for centuries. The information I had so far succeeded in gathering about it was scanty in the extreme. But everything pointed to the need of careful arrangements about transport and supplies, if serious risks and losses were to be avoided. Had not the great Venetian traveller recorded his caution? "Now, such persons as propose to cross the Desert take a week's rest in this town to refresh themselves and their cattle; and then they make ready for the journey, taking with them a month's supply for man and beast. On quitting this city they enter the Desert."

It was not a single crossing of the desert alone for which I had to provide, but a series of expeditions partly over ground quite unknown, and — most serious feature of all — implying prolonged stays at desert sites with a considerable number of labourers. The greater the uncertainty about the extent of the operations before me, the more important it was to husband my time as carefully as possible. I knew well that I could make sure of work in waterless desert only during the few months of winter when the cold would allow me to transport water in the form of ice. It was equally certain that, in order to obviate delays in a region so exceptionally devoid of resources, it would be essential to have adequate transport and supplies ready beforehand for all likely contingencies.

Thus the tasks I had to cope with during my short stay at Charklik were bound to be exacting. Within three days I had to raise in the small oasis a contingent of fifty labourers for proposed excavations; food supplies to last them for five weeks, and my own men for at least a month longer; and to collect as many camels as I could for the transport, seeing that we should have to carry