

chances for feathering his nest by perquisites more or less excusable. So a man of Liao's refined taste and scholarly turn of mind was entitled to my sympathy in this dreary Tomi of Lop-nor.

He seemed unfeignedly grateful for the pleasant diversion which my secretary's gossip brought him, and for the stimulus, too, which he drew from such old Chinese books of travel, photographs, maps, and antiques as I could show him on his repeated visits. But best of all was it that Liao still knew how to give orders and to see them obeyed. In a small oasis like Charklik, where the total of the settled agricultural population was estimated at about three hundred families, but probably did not reach that figure, it was no easy task to raise the fifty labourers I needed for excavations in the desert. Without the Amban's stringent orders it would have been quite impossible.

Whether descendants of colonists brought from Keriya and the northern oases, or of Lopliks who had taken to agriculture, all the men were thoroughly frightened by the prospect of having to leave their homes in the depth of winter for a distant and wholly unknown journey in the waterless desert north-eastward. I for my part was only too well aware of the hardships which awaited us in that desolate region, and of the risks which might have to be faced from want of water if we should fail to locate the ruins promptly, or should find the salt-springs of Altmish-bulak still unfrozen. So I was doubly anxious to enlist only men of thoroughly sound physique, and to assure their starting fully equipped with adequate winter clothing and ample supplies.

The difficulties arising over the selection of suitable men were great. Full of apprehensions themselves, and disheartened by the wailings of their relatives who were lamenting them as already doomed, they tried their best to get off by shamming disease or by other subterfuges. I was wistfully longing for such moral support as the presence of some of my old 'treasure-seeking' guides from Khotan or Niya would have given me, when help opportunely arrived on the second day in the persons of two hardy hunters from Abdal. Old Mullah and Tokhta Akhun,