

CHAPTER XXXI

ACROSS AN ERODED DRY DELTA

NEXT morning, December 15th, I had all the bags of ice which were available on the thirty donkeys carefully stacked on the north side of the highest sand cone, which we marked with a conspicuous signal staff. I arranged that the donkeys, in charge of two extra men brought for the purpose, should return as quickly as possible to the Chainut-köl base. After two days' rest there the men were to march back to our desert depot with as many donkeys as were needed to bring up the labourers' reserve food supplies, also fresh ice in the bags so far emptied, and some loads of reeds for the camels. They were then to await the arrival of the camel convoy, which I proposed to send back to this rendezvous as soon as we had reached the ruins, to fetch up all the remaining supplies. I did my best to assure that these marchings of our divided transport columns should be timed so exactly as to avoid all needless waits; for even donkeys could not be expected to go without water for more than two complete days.

But I knew well how much the success of my plans depended on our locating the ruins promptly. In any case I could not let this chance of communication pass by without despatching a mail cover under a big Chinese official envelope. It was to be sent on through my base camps at Chainut-köl and Abdal to Charklik. Thence the Amban's care would see it sped slowly but safely by the Chinese line of Dak riders on the six weeks' journey *via* Kara-shahr to Kashgar. Adding the six odd weeks of transit from Kashgar *via* India I might reasonably hope for my desert messages to reach friends in Europe some