

## CHAPTER XXXII

### FIRST EXCAVATIONS AT THE LOP-NOR SITE

DELIGHTFUL was that first night's rest at the ruins which it had cost such exertions to reach, and with the minimum thermometer showing about zero Fahrenheit on the morning of December 18th the temptation was great to keep between warm rugs and furs a little longer. But there were many reasons for making the most of our time in this region. So I was up by daybreak. An hour later the various detachments into which I had divided our transport were ready to start in accordance with the programme I had decided upon while on the march. All loads were to be left in our camp at this main group of ruins, the precious bags of ice being carefully stacked close to my tent in a place conspicuous and safe from poaching. Five camels were to march back to our half-way depot and to fetch supplies left there and such fresh ice as had been brought up since by the auxiliary donkey column.

The main convoy of camels was to be taken north to the salt springs of Altmish-bulak, in order to get a rest and much-needed grazing there. Tokhta Akhun, who was to guide them, had a year before accompanied Huntington on his plucky march to Altmish-bulak across the salt-encrusted old lake bed east of the Kara-koshun marshes. Having thence visited the two groups of Hedin's ruins, he could be relied upon to find the nearest spring quickly. He estimated that even unladen it would take the camels two days to get there. He was subsequently after a short rest to return himself with a camel to the western group of ruins, and to reconnoitre thence west and south-west for any other remains which might await exploration.