

I myself, with half-a-dozen picked men still fit for digging if the opportunity offered, was preparing to strike through the unexplored desert south-westward, and thus to make for the Tarim. I had been bent from the first upon taking a new course across the Lop desert, and was looking forward keenly to this chance of moving for once free from the *impedimenta* presented by a heavy convoy and specific archaeological tasks.

Various considerations combined to settle the direction of my course. It would have been most tempting to move to the east along the foot of the Kuruk-tagh hills, and thus to trace if possible the ancient trade route which the ruined Chinese station had once guarded, right through to the point where it diverged from the desert track still connecting Charklik with Tun-huang. But I knew well that for a direct distance of at least 120 miles no drinkable water could now be found along the line which that route must have followed. Owing to the presence of salt bogs and otherwise difficult ground the marching distance to the nearest well was likely to spread out a good deal more, and without a fresh supply of ice and animals thoroughly rested any attempt to cross it would have involved grave risks.

There was little chance of novel observations westwards, where the old trade route could be followed along the foot of the Kuruk-tagh to the Tarim; for Hedin had marched by that line on his first visit to the ruins, and since then Mr. Huntington had passed through the desert strip immediately south of the Kuruk-tagh hills in the reverse direction. He traced, indeed, the old river bed, a continuation of the present Konche Darya, which had once carried water to the site, but came nowhere upon structural remains such as might have supplied a motive for me to follow that direction. Now by striking through the desert to the south-west I should be able to survey wholly unexplored ground. At the same time this route offered the further attraction of taking me straight to the ruined fort of Merdek-shahr, which Hedin had seen in 1896 not far from the eastern lagoons of the Tarim, and which I was anxious to examine before resuming my excavations at Miran.