

CHAPTER XXXVI

ACROSS THE DESERT TO THE TARIM

THE morning of December 29th, a bright day and the first fairly calm one, saw our departure from the ancient site (Fig. 126). All the Charklik labourers who were returning *via* Abdal had their accounts for wages and donkey-hire duly settled in silver and Russian gold, with an ample Bakhshish in addition. Rai Ram Singh, for whom we had a comfortable couch prepared on the back of a camel, and Mullah, who was to look after the dismissed labourers as Yüz-bashi, *sub. pro tem.*, received my final instructions. Then, after seeing the big convoy safely started by 10 A.M., I was free myself to say farewell to the ruins and set out for the desert south-westwards. By comparison with the camp I before had to manage, my party now seemed delightfully small. Besides Ramzan, the sullen Kashmiri cook, now looking darker than ever with the grime and dirt of weeks, and Muhammadju, my personal attendant, it comprised Naik Ram Singh, Ibrahim Beg, Tokhta Akhun, lazy, good-natured Turdi, and six picked men from Charklik, who might prove useful, were a chance for digging to offer. Knowing that we should have to be prepared for much heavier going amidst the ridges of high dunes likely to flank the Tarim, I took care to keep ten of the hired camels for our transport so as to make the loads as light as possible.

We had moved through familiar ground of wind-eroded trenches and clay terraces for about four miles when our track brought us to the well-marked old river bed which we had first sighted on the day of our arrival at the site, and which here, too, was running from west to east with a