

CHAPTER XLV

THE START FOR TUN-HUANG

THE excavations at Miran had completed my archaeological tasks in the Lop-nor region. But there was plenty of hard work in the way of packing and preparations to be got through at Abdal before the actual start for Tun-huang and the westernmost parts of true China. Yet after all the exposure undergone at Miran the halt necessitated was pleasant, however humble the shelter which the wretched reed huts of Abdal offered. I was glad to find the depot left behind there quite safe under Tila's care and the ponies well rested. Rest and a warm corner had put the Surveyor on his legs again, and to some extent cured his rheumatic pains and dejection. But for myself, had I not been kept busy with practical tasks of all sorts, I could not have put up so easily with the closely packed quarters, the zone of filth hemming in the fishermen's winter quarters, and the inexpressibly dull look of the landscape. The dismal marshlands on the southern side of the dying Tarim, where salt-encrusted ground mingled with ice-sheets in unending flatness, made up a scene fit for a Cathayan Tomi.

But what did such surroundings matter when I could only spare half an hour daily for a stroll in the open! There was all the sorting and packing of the archaeological finds of the last four months, the bulk of which I now decided to send back to Kashgar for Mr. Macartney's safe-keeping. Apart from the documents which I decided to keep by my side, and which filled four boxes, all the rest of the antiques, including the bulky and often fragile wood-carvings from the Lop-nor sites,