

on it to record the exploit of the Chinese official who, in the seventeenth year of the reigning emperor, had been commissioned by the Fu-t'ai or Governor-General of the 'New Dominion' to explore and report on the route right through to Tun-huang.

The day's march, close on twenty miles, led to the north-east, keeping for most of the way along the edge of a barren gravel Sai with a thin belt of tamarisk cones showing northward. This, too, disappeared after about two-thirds of the march, and the rest lay across low ridges of gravel with no trace of vegetation dead or living. So I was glad to make for a patch of scanty tamarisk cones which came in sight when the light failed, and to halt where at least fuel was assured for the night. We knew from Tokhta Akhun who still kept with us, and from one of the Charklik donkey-men who had followed the route once before and was to act as our guide, that no water could be found on this march nor until the close of the next one. So ice had been brought along from Donglik for us men.

Till 2.30 A.M. I laboured that night finishing my big mail-bag for Kashgar and Europe, and felt no small relief when at last I saw it safely started next morning in charge of Islam, the Dakchi from Khotan, whom I had picked up in January on my passage through Charklik and ever since kept by me. Considering all conditions it was a reasonably early 'return of mail,' and as Islam was no doubt eager to get back to his home at Khotan, I had the satisfaction of learning next winter that this my last Turkestan mail reached England in the record time of about three and a half months. We had a hearty farewell from honest Tokhta Akhun, the burly Lop hunter, who had served me so well since December. He was to escort Islam and my mail-bag to Charklik, and now departed much pleased with the twenty Sers of silver, equivalent to about fifty rupees, which I gave him as wages. For Abdal, which until thirty or forty years earlier had practically known no money, only barter, this was quite a big sum.

The day's march was long and tiring especially for the animals which had gone without water. But it was