

camels. During the passage of this wilderness you hear sounds, sometimes of singing, sometimes of wailing; and it has often happened that travellers going aside to see what those sounds might be have strayed from their course and been entirely lost; for they were voices of spirits and goblins." I had only to watch the eager interest with which Chiang-ssü-yeh listened to this latter part of the account I translated, in order to realize how the awe of these desert solitudes was working its spell on him too, sceptic as he was in most matters beyond the senses.

As Yule rightly observes, "these Goblins are not peculiar to the Gobi." Yet I felt more than ever assured that Marco's stories about them were of genuine local growth, when I had travelled over the whole route and seen how closely its topographical features agree with the matter-of-fact details which the first part of his chapter records. Anticipating my subsequent observations, I may state here at once that Marco's estimate of the distance and the number of marches on this desert crossing proved perfectly correct. For the route from Charklik, his 'town of Lop,' to the 'City of Sachiü,' *i.e.* Sha-chou or Tun-huang, our plane-table survey, checked by cyclometer readings, showed an aggregate marching distance of close on 380 miles.

By special exertions amounting practically to a succession of forced marches, we managed to cover it within three weeks, indispensable halts included. But traders still reckon the journey ordinarily at twenty-eight stages for fully laden animals, and considering that at this reckoning the average for each march works out at thirteen miles, I much doubt whether any large caravan could do it in less than a month without risking serious loss of animals. Experience showed that the number of stages where water was either unobtainable or too salt for drinking were four, exactly corresponding to that of the places which Marco notes to have brackish water. In the same way his warning as to the limitation of the water-supply available elsewhere proved well founded. Nor had we to travel far before we came upon 'the hills and valleys of sand' which his description mentions.