

extent was much larger than there shown, and the wide, salt-encrusted edges indicated that its level would at times rise still higher.

A number of small isolated clay terraces were seen scattered over the flat shore, manifestly the last survivals from terrace clusters and ridges which the relentless powers of erosion had long ago ground down and carried off. Two of them, not far from the present lake shore, could be seen crowned by watch-towers, for which they offered commanding positions. But it was getting too late to approach them. Perched at the end of a long ridge projecting into the plain from the south there rose another ruined tower overlooking the route; which at this point turned to the south-east. One more great bay was crossed, filled with a succession of eroded clay terraces. There in the twilight we met for the first time a caravan, a big convoy of Keriya camels which had passed us at Miran at the beginning of February carrying the goods of some Khotan traders (Fig. 137), and which were now returning safely from Tun-huang. We did not envy the men their second desert crossing. Then the route led up a gently sloping alluvial fan, and at last in the dark, after a total march of some twenty-six miles, we pitched camp at a spring which our Abdal guide called Yantak-kuduk.

The water of the spring-fed pool proved perfectly fresh, and far better than any we had tasted for a long time. The thorny scrub close by just sufficed for the animals, and as the oasis now lay within a day's march, the morning of March 12th saw the caravan start with unwonted alacrity. On a small knoll to the south where we fixed the plane-table I observed a novel sight, a miniature shrine built of clay and evidently cherished by Chinese wayfarers; for inside the tiny cella there lay votive offerings of papers and incense sticks. It served to remind me that we were approaching a region where Buddhism, or what figures as such in Chinese syncretistic belief, is still a religion in being.

Nothing else on that day's march indicated that we were moving towards a town of the living. For fully seventeen miles we rode over a waste of gravel with practically