

no vegetation. There was nothing to intercept the view on this sterile alluvial fan, and looking back we could see the expanse of Khara-nor and the sombre hills beyond it quite clearly. Twice we crossed ancient river beds deep-cut, yet quite dry, marking probably an earlier delta of the Tang Ho. The second showed some growth of reeds, and evidently received subsoil water. Just before reaching it I caught the first distant sight of a line of trees marking the Tun-huang oasis, and after marching four miles onwards we found ourselves almost suddenly stepping from the barren Sai across the edge of cultivation.

The fine arbours and well-tilled fields, by contrast with the wastes we had passed through, looked inviting and neat, even in their wintry bareness. Half a mile onwards we came upon what looked like a dilapidated small fort now serving for cultivators' quarters. The Chinese occupants, after some parley with Chiang-ssü-yeh, allowed us to pitch our tents on the clean threshing-ground outside their high clay walls. It was evident that strangers were indeed a novel sight to them; for all the time that camp was being pitched and for hours afterwards we were watched with the utmost curiosity by every able-bodied man in the place and swarms of lively children.

There was a display of good nature all round, which was pleasing; and when I had managed somehow to make myself understood on a few simple matters by the jovial unkempt rustics, all doubts about the first welcome which might await us on true Chinese soil passed off. My own tent, as always, was kept at a good distance from the noise of the general camp. Just in front of it rose a clump of elms, and under them a picturesque little Buddhist shrine adorned with good wood-carving and some bold frescoes representing the 'Guardian divinities of the Regions.' All the surroundings breathed a novel air of well-ordered civilization; and when the crowd of good-natured watchers had dispersed with the falling darkness, I had reason to feel gratified with my first place of rest within the purlieus of a celestial population.