

inevitable feature of all work in these parts; for the 'Ya-i' who was to accompany us and carry the camera had thought fit to requisition a pony instead of his usual mount, a sturdy donkey, and so failed to turn up when everybody else was ready.

At last by half-past eight our little cavalcade started south-eastwards. Fringing the southern edge of the oasis, the grey, dune-covered hills, which account for its later name 'Sha-chou,' 'the City of the Sands,' loomed huge through the leafless trees lining the roads. Most of the route we followed through the oasis lay deeply sunk below the level of the fields—an observation which brought back memories of Khotan. But a glance at the fields would suffice to remind me that Turkestan lay behind us. In fine big plots they extended, ploughed and levelled with a care which made them look as flat and smooth as billiard tables. Of the irregular little embankments which for irrigation purposes divide and terrace Turkestan fields, there was no trace to be seen here.

After only a mile and half the road emerged on a bare gravel glacis as uncompromisingly sterile as any I have ever seen. Of dunes there were none, only a long, wall-like stretch of sandy foot-hills stretching away on our right to a hazy distance eastwards. An isolated small building, rising on what looked like a 'witness' left on eroded ground, proved to be, not a ruin, but a shrine with some modest annexes for the priests. The dwellers were absent, probably assisting in the celebrations which were reported being held in the town in order to drive off an epidemic attack described like influenza. The general look of the *morne* hills south reminded me of the equally barren scarp which the terrace-like offshoots of the Kun-lun about Karghalik present towards the plains. Two ruined towers suggested Pao-t'ais; but popular as the sacred caves no doubt were from early times, their importance was not likely to be indicated by the official marks of a high road. And in fact no further towers were met with.

We were just approaching, after a total ride of some nine miles, the shallow depression which marks the debouchure of the stream passing the sacred grottoes, when