

CHAPTER LIII

A DIFFICULT START FROM TUN-HUANG

AFTER the fascinating prospects that hurried excursion had opened before me, it seemed hard to continue my clerical toils unbroken during the days which followed; but the tasks were so heavy that, busy as I was at my table from morning until midnight, the time seemed only too short. The departure of a Khotan trader, who was to start for Charklik by March 21st, offered a chance of sending off with him Kurban Niaz, the Dak man, the last safe link for my mails to Kashgar, India, and Europe, which I was likely to have for a long time. So the letter-bag I entrusted to him for what was bound to prove close on four months' transit, grew uncommonly heavy.

In the meantime I was able to think over and settle my immediate plans. I knew from my Taklamakan experiences what the climatic conditions in the desert of Tun-huang were likely to be when once the winter had passed. So I decided upon the exploration of the ancient frontier line as the first task of my new programme. It was quite impossible to calculate beforehand with any certainty what amount of time and labour excavations along it might claim. So with plans upon the 'Thousand Buddhas' looming big before me, it seemed doubly important that I should start back to the ancient wall well provided in the matter of guides, diggers, and supplies, and thus prevent any needless delay in my proposed operations there.

It did not take me long to realize that the difficulties in all these respects would be serious. Of the ruins I was anxious to trace and explore in the desert nothing