

I had become quite accustomed, there seemed to burst with the telegrams a flash of modern life.

This surprise would have sufficed to cheer me for the rest of the day. But the march too, short as it was, offered interest of its own. At several points we passed large bastioned forts with high and massive walls of clay which looked recent. Inside were only a few houses or farm buildings rarely tenanted. I now learned that these strongholds, so thoroughly mediaeval in look and reminiscent of the Pathan village forts, or 'Killas,' familiar to me from the Indian North-West Frontier, had all been built or repaired by the neighbouring villagers during the troubled times of the Tungan rebellion. Traditional Chinese notions had led the unfortunate settlers to seek safety behind high walls, however inadequate their defence was in numbers or spirit. So all these scattered places of refuge fell one after the other before the onslaught of the fanatical Muhammadan rebels, who spared neither women nor children. During the successive inroads of the great murdering bands there escaped only that portion of the population which had sought refuge in the town, and many died there of starvation.

Though over thirty years had passed since that time of horrors it was easy to note on all sides evidence of its lasting effects. The farther we passed from the town the more frequent became the sight of ruined houses and temples. Close by there were often quite substantial farms which had been reoccupied, and the land around was now under careful cultivation. But the population was manifestly still far from having made up its terrible losses in numbers. Gradually I noticed stretches of uncultivated ground appearing on either side of the canal we were following, while in the distance beyond them rows of trees marked other finger-like extensions of the oasis aligned along more canals. Abundant scrub attested that the soil of the intervening waste strips was quite fertile and only waiting to be brought under cultivation again.

Here and there the ruins of old homesteads could be seen rising amidst these abandoned fields, and troops of graceful small antelopes were now browsing there in peace.