

Clearly the villagers were no hunters. But whether this was due to surviving Buddhist feeling about the taking of life, or to some special local superstition, or simply to sheer indolence, I attempted in vain to find out.

The suspicious reticence of the people proved a terrible barrier throughout. In time I learned to realize that even the most reserved and shy of Turkestan 'Taghliks' were almost loquacious when compared with these good people of Tun-huang. No question I put about the reason which caused these areas of fertile land to remain waste, ever elicited any other answer beyond that impenetrable 'Pu chih-tao,' "I do not know." Was it really a diminution of the water-supply since pre-rebellion days, or rather the want of adequate labour for more extensive irrigation? It seemed difficult to believe in the former as I looked at the overflowing canal and the big range under deep snow which came into full view on the south as the ground got more open.

We camped in a tamarisk grove near the hamlet of Shih-tsao, and before starting next morning were to my relief joined by a small convoy of coolies and camels. The eight men whom the Ya-mên attendants had managed to scrape together looked the craziest crew I ever led to digging—so torpid and enfeebled by opium were they; but I was glad to have even them. So they were promptly advanced a fair lump of silver to lay in provisions, and the cart which had brought them from town was to be taken along for their conveyance as far as the ground would permit. Moving for some three miles northward along the canal we came upon the crumbling homesteads of a village left deserted since its sack by the Tungans. In the midst of this desolation it was pleasant to find the decayed fort tenanted by a number of baby camels, only a few days old, which were being kept here out of mischief and the biting wind while their mothers were grazing outside. The antics of the quaint little beasts supplied a contrast to the grim scenes of death and plunder which these walls must have witnessed scarcely forty years before.

Then we turned off to the north-west across a belt of scrub-covered waste where the lines of irrigation