

## CHAPTER LVII

### ANCIENT REMAINS FOR THE FUTURE

I was sorry to leave Nan-hu; for the abundant traces of ancient occupation, the quaint peaceful ways of Chinese village life, the picturesque half-ruined temples, and most of all the delicious clear water of its springs, had invested the little oasis with a peculiar charm. But the ruins along the ancient wall in the desert north were calling, and I knew that the days or weeks available for their exploration before the fierce heat would set in were numbered. So I reluctantly fixed April 11th as the time for our start. Ten men was the maximum contingent which the oasis could spare without injury to the spring labour now fully in progress in its fields. Their houses were almost all within shouting distance of our camp, and orders had been issued the day before. Yet it was nearly noon before the men were collected by the sleepy village elder. Men turning up without rations or spades and newly hired camels without ropes to tie their loads, all helped to extend the usual delay attending a start in these parts. The distance to be covered across the desert to the ancient wall by the Lop-nor route was too great for a single march. I had, therefore, decided to move that day only as far as the water of the Nan-hu springs reaches.

But even so far we were not destined to go. After the few warm days we had enjoyed in Nan-hu, a storm was gathering. It broke with full violence from the northwest just as the caravan had left the last fields of the oasis, and was toiling up the steep sand-covered ridge which borders it northward. I had ridden ahead to the ruined tower which crowns the ridge west of the picturesque