

soil at twenty yards' distance from each other, and upon remains of a thick rope of twisted reed which once joined them. It had manifestly been used for tethering horses after a fashion my own men often used when camping on absolutely bare ground.

By the evening of the second day the excavation of the ruins at the post T. VIII. had advanced sufficiently far for me to leave the completion of it to the care of Chiang and the Naik. All day a fierce gale from the east had been blowing, and eyes and throat suffered badly from the dust that rose from the dug-up quarters. It needed all the elation caused by the day's epigraphical finds to bear these atmospheric conditions cheerfully. They became more or less constant thereafter, and only left us at times to give way to equally trying heat and glare. As I rode the seven miles back to camp, the barren gravel Sai looking more desolate than ever in the dust-laden twilight, I was met to my surprise by a long string of camels. Seen from a distance across the absolutely level plateau where all perspective deceives, they suggested a phantom column moving along the old wall.

The season for travelling by the desert route to Lop-nor had now wellnigh passed. My surprise at meeting this belated caravan became still greater when it proved to be Sher Ali Khan's venture to which I had entrusted my letters so busily written at Tun-huang. I had thought them now safely nearing Abdal, and my disappointment was naturally keen when I found that this mail-bag, to which I had devoted almost the whole of a cold night, had managed to cover in eleven days less than eighty miles out of its four months' journey to Europe! The caravan men, a motley collection of Khotanliks, and people from Ak-su and Kashgar long exiled on the Kan-su border, crowded eagerly round me. It was a rueful tale they told of two valuable ponies, their only riding animals, which had strayed from a camp near the marshes to the east, and in spite of all search could not be recovered. None of the men, except the guide, had ever followed this desert track; and this worthy, upon whom they relied for a safe passage, was a young fellow who had first marched to Tun-huang