

to be dangerous. There would be nothing to indicate whether the actual bed, in which we might hope to find at least subsoil water by digging wells, lay to the east or west. If we continued our course to the south there would be great risk of our water-supply getting completely exhausted, and of animals—if not of men, too—succumbing through thirst long before the line of wells and oases at the foot of the Kun-lun could be reached.

Against these objections there were to be reckoned the loss of time and other drawbacks which any change of plans would involve. After careful consideration I decided to stick to my programme and to guard, within the limits of human prevision, against the risks lying before us. An adequate supply of food and water was essential to assure safety. So I took special care to verify that all my people had actually provided themselves with supplies for one and a half months as ordered. The small contingent of labourers I wished to take along from Shahyar was to be equally provisioned, and also equipped against the rigours of the desert winter. I decided to limit this contingent to eight men, just sufficient for help with well-digging and loading *en route*, and as a nucleus for prospective excavation work at the other end.

The selection and equipping of the men during the one day's halt at Shahyar proved no easy affair; for the rumours about our expedition had been sufficiently deterrent to make it hard for the village head-men who had to furnish their quota to find acceptable men. At first they tried to pass off helpless persons, physically unfit for such a journey or else without adequate clothing and food supplies. The men picked out at last were sturdy enough in body; but, in spite of ample advances and the assurance of very liberal wages, they were so dismayed at the prospect that, when their district officer came to pay me his ceremonial visit, they all fell to praying on their knees for release from dreaded sufferings and certain disaster.

Luckily the energetic young Mandarin was a man of the right stuff. He reassured them by emphasizing my proved knowledge of desert travel and my determination to look after their comfort and safety, and in addition