

CHAPTER XIV

THROUGH THE LOP DESERT TO TUN-HUANG

SECTION I.—THE ROUTE FROM ABDAL TO TUN-HUANG

ON February 11 my labours at the Mirān site were completed, and by the evening of the same day my camp was again shifted to Abdal. There the safe packing of all the antiques which had now to be sent back to Kāshgar (Fig. 147) and multifarious preparations kept me hard at work for nine days.

Halt at Abdal.

On February 21, 1907, I started my caravan, heavily laden with supplies for the new field of exploration to the east. In my Personal Narrative I have given a full account of the trying journey which carried me in the course of three weeks to the westernmost oasis of Kan-su.¹ Here a brief summary of the characteristic features of the desert ground traversed,² and a rapid review of the data that we possess regarding the historical topography of the route, must suffice. On certain geographical questions which the survey of this route has raised much fresh light has been thrown by the far more extensive surveys which I was able to make over this forbidding ground, during the winters of 1914 and 1915.³ But these topographical results still await publication by the Trigonometrical Survey Office, Dehra Dun.

Geographical observations on journey.

There are, and during historical times always have been, two possible direct routes connecting the Lop tract south of the Tārīm with Tun-huang, and thus with westernmost China.⁴ One somewhat the longer, but practicable throughout the year in spite of difficulties caused by scarcity of water and grazing, passes along the high, barren slopes of that eastern extension of the main K'un-lun range which to the people of the Lop tract is known as the Āltin-tāgh or 'Fore-mountains'. This route was surveyed under my instructions by Rai Rām Singh in 1907, and again by R. B. Lāl Singh in 1913; it is shown on the maps, but for the present need not concern us further. The Lopliks know it as the *tāgh-yol*, or 'mountain route'. The other route, distinguished by them as the *chöl-yol*, 'desert route', follows throughout the deepest line of the long-stretched depression which intervenes between the Kuruk-tāgh in the north and the glaci-like foot of the Āltin-tāgh in the south.

Two routes to Tun-huang.

It is this 'desert route' which we have briefly to sketch here. Pronounced differences in the character of the ground divide it into three main sections. The first, comprising a total marching distance of some 158 miles, skirts the whole length of the Lop lake-basin on the south. It starts by winding round the southern edge of the Kara-koshun marshes. Then it keeps close to the south shore of the vastly greater salt-encrusted lake-bed, now dry, to which in Chapters X and XI I have so often had occasion to refer.⁵ At Donglik, the first halting-place from Abdal, where the two routes through the desert and the mountains divide, the difficulty about water already made itself felt; for the small stream there, appropriately known as Achchik-bulak, 'the bitter spring', is salt.

Past the Kara-koshun.

A double march of some forty-five miles over waterless ground, overlooking the dried-up, salt-encrusted lake-bed, brings the traveller to the salt spring of Chindailik. Beyond this, the present caravan track for sixteen miles cuts across the hard, crumpled, salt-cake surface of what was a big bight of this ancient Lop sea (see Map No. 64. A, B. 2). Professor E. Huntington had here noted the

Salt-encrusted old lake-bed.

¹ See *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 503-46; ii. pp. 1-8.

² Cf. Maps Nos. 61, 64, 67, 68, 70, 74, 78.

³ Cf. *Geogr. Journal*, 1916, xlviii. pp. 126 sqq., 205 sqq.

⁴ See above, pp. 320, 340, 418.

⁵ For the explorations on its north side effected in 1914-15, cf. *Third Journey of Exploration, Geogr. Journal*, 1916, xlviii. pp. 126 sqq. [See now also, *Geographical Review* (New York), 1920, ix. pp. 25 sqq.]