

of the old villager previously mentioned, led beyond the last fields of Nan-hu up to the low ridge of detritus which flanks the gorge cut by the Nan-hu 'Yār' from the west. A ruined watch-tower, about twenty-three feet square at the base and twenty feet high, built of rough bricks measuring about nineteen by ten by five inches, formed a conspicuous landmark on the top. The fact that thin layers of tamarisk brushwood were inserted in the brickwork after every four or five courses suggested antiquity. Here we were overtaken by a violent sand-storm, which made it difficult to see ahead or even to keep one's eyes open, and obliged us to halt at the tiny, half-abandoned hamlet of Shui-i after a total march of about five miles. In my Personal Narrative I have described the effect which these storms, particularly frequent in the spring, have upon ground such as that in most of the desert west of Tun-huang.<sup>1</sup> A perfect hail of small pebbles and of coarse grains of sand is driven along the surface and through the air to some height above it. But there are not enough fine particles left to be carried far up into the atmosphere and to form thick dust-clouds, such as would spread darkness in the Taklamakān or at the western oases of the Tārīm Basin; hence, through a yellow haze above, the sun remains visible all the time.

Effect of  
sand-storm.

The enforced night's halt at one of the three half-ruined farms of Shui-i was compensated by observations of a quasi-archaeological interest, which will be found detailed in the account of *Desert Cathay* already referred to. In the light of the following morning it was easy to see that not the tumble-down refuse-filled buildings alone, but also the fields and arbours around them, bore plain marks of approaching abandonment. The fields, though still cultivated, were being overrun by light drift-sand. Irrigation was not sufficient to keep off the low dunes moving up from the west—skirmishers, as it were, thrown out by the serried array of high sands which envelops the whole Nan-hu depression from that side. They had already covered the feet of the trees standing in rows some 300 yards off the homestead which had afforded us shelter, and the shallow channels carrying water to them appeared likely to get choked. Elsewhere I could see fields overgrown with thorny scrub, threshing-floors edged round by low dunes, or small orchards, once neatly laid out, where the drift-sand now lay several feet deep along the fences. The cuts needed for irrigation looked sadly neglected. Half a mile or so to the south-west an avenue of large trees marked the small outlying oasis of Hsi-yüan, where two holdings were said to be still occupied. The area intervening between it and Shui-i seemed to have been cultivated until recent times. But the prevailing practice of cutting down for timber all trees no longer irrigated had removed such evidence as could easily be observed from a distance.

Approach-  
ing aban-  
donment of  
Shui-i.

In the farm-houses, originally built in a substantial style with plenty of solid timber, advancing decay was only too plainly proved by walls leaning over in a dangerous fashion, half-broken roofs, etc. Not far from the main farm a small ruined shrine still kept its painted gateway. The beams of the roof had fallen, and the drift-sand caught within the walls had almost completely smothered what remained of the gaily-painted clay images. An air of hopeless decay hovered over the whole of Shui-i, and it needed but little antiquarian imagination to call up the picture it will present when the desert shall have finally claimed it. Thus, I thought, *mutatis mutandis*, the hamlets of Dandān-oilik or the Niya Site must have looked during the last decades preceding their final abandonment. The rubbish-heaps accumulated at Shui-i seemed to hold out promise of useful 'finds' to the archaeologist who may have to clear them, say two or three thousand years hence. Here the modern Chinese custom of collecting all torn pieces of writing in special receptacles and then burning them was certainly in abeyance—and from consideration for that confrère far off in the ages I, too, purposely refrained from burning my own waste paper!

A future  
'old village  
site'.

<sup>1</sup> See *Desert Cathay*, ii. pp. 83 sqq.