

The camp I have just mentioned was pitched on a sort of extremely flat water-parting, which therefore afforded an extraordinarily spacious view, without being to any noteworthy extent restricted by the low elevations around. Not a sign of life of any description whatsoever, still less any indication of a spring! It was in fact a lunar landscape, the awful desolation of which defies description. Towards the north the prospect was open, the surface being slightly undulating, with extremely low hills; probably we were able to see for 30 versts in that direction. By this the cairns or landmarks of the old road had come to an end, and we saw no other token of human presence.

As I believed I had now crossed the ranges which make up the eastward prolongation of the Kuruk-tagh, or more correctly speaking the westward continuation of the Bej-sän system, and as there was here the same level plain that we saw to the north, I deemed it prudent to turn our faces west in quest of the spring of Altmisch-bulak, from which we were at that time computed to be eight days distant. That was the only point where we could count with certainty upon being able to procure water, and as I had no guide — guides are not to be had in that uninhabited region — I durst no longer expose the caravan to risk, for to go to Hami lay entirely outside of my plans. On the 13th February therefore we travelled at starting towards the north-west, then curved round towards the west-north-west, and the west. We early passed several dry brooks running towards the north-east. Here we perceived some tamarisks and scrub-plants in a schor depression, which probably remains moist for some time after a shower. Farther to the west we approached the end of a mountain ridge more distinctly marked than the range last described, though it was not very high. It shed off however southwards from its crest several distinctly marked watercourses, the bottoms of which contained some gravel. Between these dry brooks the ground was slightly undulating, in fact almost level.



Fig. 77.

Thus in the course of our northward tramp we had crossed five successive parallel ranges; and of these the second was pierced by a transverse glen, the other four were each surmounted by a low, flat pass. It was at the foot of the sixth range that we made Camp No. CXLVI. On the whole these were of course the same ranges as those Roborovskij crossed over in the journey from which I have quoted above. Yet it is evident that these ridges and series of hills cannot be regarded as continuous chains of mountains. They are frequently broken, like the little range depicted on fig. 77. Roborovskij tells us that he skirted round the ends of two or three of them. Very often it is difficult enough to decide whether a series of these unimportant swellings or eminences should be called a true range or should merely be described as broken ground. This occurred at Camp No. CXLV. Anyway we had traversed the region which figures on Russian maps as the Ghaschun-Gobi or Ilchuma, and which is crossed from west to east by the Kuruk-