

Descent
from shore
of ancient
sea-bed.

The shore of the ancient sea was well marked by the salty soil sloping away everywhere, gently but steadily, from the foot of the outermost Yārdangs towards the level plain. Owing to the gentleness of the gradient, it was difficult to estimate accurately the relative depression of the bed at the point where its surface seemed to become absolutely flat. But it could certainly not be less than thirty feet and might well be more. The distant hill-top to the south-east towards which I had proposed to steer became invisible as soon as we had begun to descend from the foot of the Yārdang line, and I accordingly directed our course to S. 94° E., where a short stretch of hill outline, rising island-like on the horizon, served as a convenient guiding point. Within half a mile from the 'shore' the salt surface, so far tolerably uniform, turned into a seemingly endless expanse of crumpled puckered cakes of hard salt. The edges of the buckled-up slabs of salt, rising at an angle, protruded often a foot or more above others crushed in beneath them (Fig. 179). The ragged edges invariably showed the white of pure salt, while the upper surfaces of the cakes generally had a greyish hue, probably due to the admixture of fine dust.

Trying
march over
hummocky
salt crust.

Progress over this hummocky *shōr* was tryingly painful to the feet, even when protected by stout boots. Yet the camels kept up at first better than I had hoped for, evidently because stepping out widely they were able to select the less corrugated spots to put their feet on and thus to avoid the worst of sharp edges. After about eight miles' march the low hill-top to the south-east I had sighted from camp at sunrise reappeared above the hazy horizon. As the hills to the east seemed still as distant as before, I decided to steer for the former and thus to shorten somewhat the distance that still separated us from the south-eastern inlet of the dead sea along which we should find the Mīrān-Tun-huang caravan track with its wells. Still farther away to the south-south-east, there soon rose what looked like the top of a bold detached headland. I took it—rightly, as the subsequent survey proved—for the salient angle which the barren range overlooking that inlet projects into the dried-up sea-bed, and which I had previously sighted on our journey in 1907.⁸

Low hills
fringing N.
extension
of dry sea.

It could now be seen that the island-like hill-tops to the north-east, which we had sighted from camp in the morning, joined on to the low range bordering the northernmost extension of the dry sea basin east of Kaurük-bulak (Map No. 32. B, c. 2). The observation made at this time of the height of its crest sinking towards the east has been confirmed by the clinometrical readings taken by Lāl Singh, who passed nearer to the foot of that desert range. Our plane-table intersections clearly indicated a bend of the range to the north-east, probably enclosing a bay-like extension of the ancient salt sea. Lāl Singh's route, which actually led across this bay, subsequently proved that we had done well to avoid it by effecting our passage farther south.

Ridges of
hard salt
cakes.

After we had covered two miles of the new course, S. 120° E., the surface became even more trying than before. It now looked exactly like a choppy sea overrun with 'white horses', one to two feet high and suddenly turned to hard salt.⁹ I wondered how long it would be before the camels' feet were all lacerated by the sharply serrated edges of the smaller protuberances which even their long legs could not avoid. And, indeed, I noticed that their track, as I followed it when hastening ahead after each fixing of the plane-table, was grievously marked by blood-stains. The camels, moreover, found a fresh source of trouble from here onwards in the shape of strange gaping cavities, usually from three to four feet in depth and somewhat less in width at their mouth, which studded the ground, often in close proximity to each other. Their sides were invariably encrusted with heaped-up floe-like blocks of rather darker salt (Fig. 180). These were leaning at sharp angles

⁸ See *Desert Cathay*, i. pp. 520 sqq.; *Serindia*, v. Map No. 67. B, c. 3.

⁹ For a very graphic and true description of the same

kind of surface in the ancient sea-bed where Professor E. Huntington crossed it on his plucky journey from Kōshe-langza to Āltmish-bulak, see his *Pulse of Asia*, pp. 250 sq.